

Christ the Creator and the Creator Spirit: The Cosmic Drama of the Incarnation and the Remaking of Creation

The church . . . sees the beginning only in dying, from the viewpoint of the end.

—Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall* (1933)

The mystery of the incarnation of the Logos holds the power of all the hidden *logoi* and figures of Scripture as well as the knowledge of visible and intelligible creatures. Whoever knows the mystery of the cross and the tomb knows the *logoi* of these creatures. And whoever has been initiated in the ineffable power of the resurrection knows the purpose (*logos*) for which God originally made all things.

—Maximus the Confessor, *Chapters on Theologia and Oikonomia* 1.66

If there is a prime pattern of mimesis in patristic interpretation of the biblical witnesses to Creator and creation, it is the consistent emulation of their virtually seamless integration of creation and salvation. Rather than rigidly segregating the Creator's "original" plan for creation from his strategy in redeeming it from its fallen and corrupted state, the majority of patristic authors ultimately followed Irenaeus' example in seeing these as enfolded into a singular christocentric economy, with the Creator seizing a glorious new creation from the jaws of a merely apparent defeat of his creative purposes by Satanic and Adamic sin. In a striking passage in his *Against Heresies*, Irenaeus pronounces that Adam sinned and became mortal (a captive to death), and that Christ suffered and died, on the same day of creation's week, the sixth day. In this day Christ was "recapitulating in himself universal humanity from beginning to end" (*recapitulans enim universum hominem in se ab initio usque ad finem*) and thereby granting humanity a *second* creation. Indeed, adds Irenaeus, Christ recapitulated this mythic "day" itself by working

all its events to his own objectives.¹ Here is a classic piece of early Christian “thick” typology wherein this mythic day represents the singularity and simultaneity of the divine will and action. It is a lucid example of how, for Irenaeus and his theological heirs, protology and teleology invariably hang together in accordance with the Creator’s singleness of purpose.

The drama of the divine economy, as projected in early Christian theology and piety, is the intricate plot (*ὁπóθεις*) of God’s forward-moving creative and salvific activity, driving toward an eschatological target or σκοπός which, in view of the simultaneity of his will, is always also a throwback, as it were, to his original creativity. The “new” actions of God on behalf of creation are mysteriously also a “retrieval” of his inexhaustible resourcefulness. The present chapter will focus on sampling how early Christian thinkers imagined the drama between Creator and creation to have played out concretely in the works of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit within the economy. Thus I will be undertaking a more in-depth analysis of interpretive themes broached in the last chapter, namely, the distinctive ways that Christ and the Holy Spirit were understood to inaugurate a new creation using the resources of the old.

I. THE COSMIC CHRIST: DIVINE CREATIVITY IN THE INCARNATION

The Birth of Jesus and the Remaking of Human Nature

In the early church the virgin birth of Jesus assumed profound significance for multiple reasons: its miraculous character;² its indication of Christ’s divine provenance and full humanity;³ its funding of the veneration of Mary as the New Eve and as Theotokos;⁴ and its indirect encouragement of the ascetical ideal of virginity.⁵ But the virgin birth was also deemed a creative and saving

¹ *Adv. haer.* 5.23.2 (SC 153:290–2); cf. similarly Ps-Chrysostom, *Hom. Pasch.* 27 (SC 48:137).

² See e.g. Ambrose, *Expos. in Lucam* 2.17 (CSEL 32.4:51); Augustine, *Serm.* 192.1 (PL 38:1011–12); Peter Chrysologus, *Serm.* 148 (CCSL 24B:917–22).

³ Early on see esp. Tertullian, *De carni Christi* 18–22 (Evans, 60–74).

⁴ For the Mary/Eve parallel, see e.g. Justin, *Dial. c. Tryphone* 100.5–6 (Bobichon, 454–6); Irenaeus, *Adv. haer.* 3.22.1–4 (SC 211:430–44); Tertullian, *De carne Christi* 17 (Evans, 58–60); Epiphanius, *Panarion* 78 (GCS 37:468–70); Cyril of Jerusalem, *Cat.* 12.15 (PG 33:741B); Ephrem, *Hymnus de nativitate* 17.4 (CSCO 186:87–8); id., *Hymnus de ecclesia* 49.7 (CSCO 198:126). On Mary as Theotokos, see e.g. Athanasius, *Or. c. Arianos* 3.29 (PG 26:385–8); Cyril of Alexandria, *Ep.* 1 (*ad monachos Aegypti*) (PG 74:12D–40B).

⁵ These themes, and many of the principal relevant patristic texts, have been ably identified and outlined by Luigi Gambero, *Mary and the Fathers of the Church: The Blessed Virgin Mary in Patristic Thought* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1999); and John McGuckin, ed., *We Believe in One Lord Jesus Christ*, *Ancient Christian Doctrine* 2 (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 126–35.

action in its own right in the inception of Jesus' earthly ministry. It was both a *theopractic* event, insofar as the Father "sent" his Son to be born of a woman (cf. Gal. 4:4), and a *christopractic* initiative since Christ, as co-Creator, was himself the acting subject of his incarnation.⁶

On the christopractic side, as many early Christian writers underscore, Christ created in the womb of Mary the flesh that he assumed for humanity's sake, having already created the body of the Virgin who gave him carnal birth without losing her virginity.⁷ As Tertullian would have it, Christ made the Virgin his "wife" before she was his mother because, like a husband, he acted "by the law of the open body" (*patefacti corporis lege*), opening the Virgin's womb for her to conceive but doing so non-sexually.⁸ The creative divine Wisdom "built himself a house" (Prov. 9:1), says Gregory of Nyssa.⁹ Or, as Augustine asserts, the very Creator Christ who produced the "seeds" of all natural things, when there had been no such seeds, made for himself a man "without seed" (*sine semine*) and furthermore chose the time to do so.¹⁰ In a single act he both created his own humanity and instituted the composite divine-human hypostasis for the sake of all creation.¹¹ To say this, in an ever more self-consciously trinitarian context, was by no means to ignore the Holy Spirit's role in the creation of Jesus' humanity, especially as affirmed in the emerging ecumenical confessions. In his late-fourth-century *Commentary on the Apostles' Creed*, for example, Rufinus of Aquileia declares that Jesus' birth "by the Holy Spirit from the Virgin Mary" means precisely that "The Holy Spirit is accounted the Creator both of the Lord's flesh and of his shrine [the Virgin]."¹² "If the Virgin conceived as of his operation and power," writes Ambrose, "who can deny that the Holy Spirit is Creator?"¹³

⁶ On both theopractic and christopractic language as already rooted in the New Testament, see Arland Hultgren, *Christ and His Benefits: Christology and Redemption in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 42, 65, 136, 142, 169.

⁷ e.g. cf. Athanasius, *De incarn.* 8, 18 (Thomson, 152, 178); Epiphanius of Salamis, *Ancoratus* 32 (PG 43:76A–B); Ephrem, *Hymnus de nativitate* 7.1 (CSCO 186:55–6); Augustine, *Serm.* 189.2 (PG 38:1105): "The one who created her was created from her, and he brought her fertility while not corrupting her [virginal] integrity" (*Creatus est de ea quam creavit; attulit ei fecunditatem, non corrupit ejus integritatem*). See also Arator, *Historia apostolica* 2.70–3 (CCSL 130:309).

⁸ *De carne Christi* 23 (Evans, 76–80). This provocative image was key to Tertullian's understanding of Christ's recreation of human nature through his virgin birth, as shown by Willemien Otten, "Christ's Birth of a Virgin Who Became a Wife: Flesh and Speech in Tertullian's *De carne Christi*," *Vigiliae Christianae* 51 (1997): 247–60.

⁹ Gregory of Nyssa, *Antirrheticus adversus Apollinarium* (GNO 3.1:144); id., *De tridui inter mortem et resurrectionem domini nostri Iesu Christi spatio* (GNO 9:291); cf. Leo the Great, *Ep.* 28.2 (the *Tome*) (PL 54:763A).

¹⁰ *Ep.* 137.10 (CSEL 44:109).

¹¹ *Ibid.* 137.12 (CSEL 44:111).

¹² *Comm. in symbolum apostolorum* 9 (PL 21:349B); cf. Ambrose, *De Spiritu Sancto* 2.5.37–41 (CSEL 79:100–2).

¹³ *De Spiritu Sancto* 2.5.43 (CSEL 79:103).

It became commonplace among patristic theologians East and West to accentuate the paradox of the eternal Creator having condescended into the spatio-temporal confines of the Virgin's womb without compromising his own transcendence. But Ephrem the Syrian, in his Nativity hymns, dwells specifically on the fact that the Creator Christ made himself subject to human gestation and birth without suspending any of his creative operations. Ephrem comes very close to Basil of Caesarea's description of Mary's womb being not a constraint but a "workshop of the economy" (*ἐργαστήριον τῆς οἰκονομίας*),¹⁴ analogous to the larger theatre of Christ's cosmic labor. Precisely while he was creating his own flesh Christ was also creating other fetuses in other wombs, as well as sustaining the whole world:

While his body in the womb was being formed,
his power was constructing all the members.
While the fetus of the Son was [still] being formed in the womb,
he himself was forming babies in the womb.
Ineffectual as was his body in the womb,
his power in the womb was not correspondingly ineffectual . . .

Thus although all of him was dwelling in the womb,
his hidden will was supervising all . . .

For while the power dwelt in the womb,
it was forming babes in the womb.
His power embraced the one who embraced him,
for if his power were curtailed all would collapse.
Indeed, the power that contained all creation,
while he was in the womb, did not desert all.
He formed his individuality, the Image, in the womb,
and he formed in all wombs all persons . . .

By power from him Mary's womb became able
to bear the one who bears all.
From the great treasury of all creation
Mary gave to him everything that she gave.¹⁵

In another of the Nativity hymns, Ephrem similarly writes:

The Power that governs all dwelt in a small womb.
While dwelling there, he was holding the reins of the universe.
His Parent was ready for his will to be fulfilled.

¹⁴ Basil, *Hom. 27 (in sanctam Christi generationem)* (PG 31:1464A). On this notion see also Gambero, *Mary and the Fathers of the Church*, 143–5.

¹⁵ *Hymnus de nativitate* 4, ll. 160–2, 165, 174–7, 182–3 (CSCO 186:40, 41, 42), trans. Kathleen McVey, *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns*, CWS (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 101, 102 (slightly modified).

The heavens and all creation were filled by him.
 The Sun entered the womb, and in the height and depth
 His rays were dwelling.
 He dwelt in the vast wombs of all creation.
 They were too small to contain the greatness of the First-born.
 How indeed did that small womb of Mary suffice for him?
 It is a wonder if [. . .] sufficed for him.
 Of all the wombs that contained him, one womb sufficed:
 [the womb] of the great one who begot him.¹⁶

This coordination between the *universal* creative and redemptive prowess of the Creator Christ and the *particularity* of his initiative in designing for himself a bodily dwelling in Jesus of Nazareth was a key element in theological exposition of his birth. So too, however, was the coordination between the dimensions of “old” and “new,” presenting the virgin birth as a bridge between Christ’s original creative work and his recreative work of incarnation to recast human nature and renew all creation. Through the New Adam, eternally birthed from the Father and carnally born of the New Eve, being in himself the Firstborn and the first fruits of the new creation, a new *eschatological* humanity was beginning to be fashioned. Gregory of Nyssa provides a lucid summary in this regard:

. . . for the Maker of human nature at the first and afterwards is one and the same. *Then* he took dust from the earth and formed humanity; *afterwards*, he took dust from the Virgin, and did not merely form man, but formed man about himself. *Then*, he created; *afterwards*, he was created. *Then*, the Word created flesh; *afterwards*, the Word became flesh, that he might change our flesh to spirit, by being made partaker with us in flesh and blood. Of this new creation therefore in Christ, which he himself began, he was called the first-born (cf. Col. 1:15; Rom. 8:29), being the first-fruits of all (cf. 1 Cor. 15:20, 23), both of those begotten into life, and of those quickened by resurrection of the dead, “that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living” (Rom. 14:9), and might sanctify the whole lump (cf. Rom. 11:16) by means of its first-fruits in himself.¹⁷

The strong Irenaean sense of recapitulation (as *re*-capitulation) is evident here and in much patristic interpretation of the virgin birth. The New Adam did not simply displace the Old but recovered his primordial dignity. Athanasius and other writers repeat Irenaeus’ evocative parallelism between the innocent soil used to create Adam and the unsullied “soil” of the Virgin used by the New Adam, who created *all* soil, to form his human flesh.¹⁸ By this account, Adam’s

¹⁶ Ibid. 21.6–7 (CSCO 186:105–6), trans. McVey, 174–5 (slightly modified).

¹⁷ C. Eun. 3.2.53–54 (GNO 2:70), trans. NPNF² 5:158 (modified, with emphasis added).

¹⁸ cf. Irenaeus, *Adv. haer.* 3.21.10 (SC 211:428–9); Athanasius, *Or. c. Arianos* 2.7 (PG 26:161B); Ephrem, *Hymnus de nativitate* 18.13 (CSCO 186:93); John Chrysostom, *De mutatione nominum* 2.3 (PG 51:129); Maximus the Confessor, *Amb.* 42 (PG 91:1325A).

prelapsarian dignity was drawn into the flesh of the incarnate Christ. His “createdness” as such was once more confirmed as good in the womb of the New Eve, but we now see in Christ that Adam’s created nature was still a potentiality not fully realized. This point is crucial, especially in Greek patristic thought.¹⁹ Thus Christ not only rescued what Adam lost, reclaimed Adam’s vocation, and liberated Adam and his posterity from the consequences of sin, he also opened up the full potential of human nature by setting in motion its deification. In one sense it is true that the “end” in Christ achieves a return to the beginning, and yet in another sense this end is utterly novel, inaugurating an unprecedented eschatological reality.

A particularly substantial exposition of this theme appears in Maximus the Confessor’s *Ambiguum* 42, in which he elucidates Gregory Nazianzen’s portrait of the “three births” of Christ: the birth through the original inbreathing of life into the human creature (Gen. 2:7); the birth proper to his incarnation and baptism; and the birth effected through his resurrection from the dead.²⁰ Maximus expounds at length on the first and second of these, distinguishing the universal “creaturely origin” (γένεσις) of humankind from individuals’ bodily birth (γέννησις) through human parentage. The latter having been violated by the Adamic fall and obscured by passibility (τὸ πάθος; τὸ παθητικόν), meaning the liability of sexed creatures to deviant passions, Maximus argues that Christ, by giving himself to be born of a virgin, free of sexual generation, healed the rift and fused creaturely origin (γένεσις) and bodily birth (γέννησις).²¹ He further explains that Nazianzen deliberately subsumed Christ’s virgin birth and his baptism into the “second” birth, since together through these he annulled the power of passibility-gone-awry, recovered authentic human freedom, and set humanity on the path to deification.²²

Detailing this remaking (ἀνάπλασις) of human nature by Christ, Maximus applies a critical distinction between humanity’s “natural principle” (λόγος φύσεως), the inviolable integrity of which is confirmed in the incarnation, and its “mode of existence” (τρόπος ὑπάρξεως) that Christ has thoroughly transformed and reoriented, thereby opening up a whole new horizon of human nature.²³ Already in the case of human generation itself, Maximus clarifies that Christ did not abolish sexual procreation but cleansed it according to its natural principle so as “to render its natural operation steadfast by the Spirit

¹⁹ Theodore of Mopsuestia seems to maintain that Adam was originally created *mortal* since Christ the New Adam was the first to bear immortal, perfected humanity according to the divine economy. See his *Comm. in Johannem* 2.3.29 (Syriac recension; CSCO 115:78).

²⁰ Gregory Nazianzen, *Or.* 40.2 (PG 36:360C), as in Maximus, *Amb.* 42 (PG 91:1316A–C).

²¹ *Amb.* 42 (PG 91:1316C–1317C).

²² *Ibid.* (PG 91:1345C–1349A).

²³ *Ibid.* (PG 91:1317D–1321B, 1341D–1345A).

in the good for which it was created.”²⁴ In addition, Maximus proposes that Christ’s innovation of the “mode” of human nature, even though it happened sequentially *after* many of God’s signs and wonders in salvation history, was “the truly newest mystery for which and through which (τὸ δι’ ὃ . . . καὶ δι’ οὗ καινότερον ὄντως μυστήριον)” the Creator altered the modes (τρόποι) but not the natures of other created things for salutary purposes: e.g. the bodily translation of Enoch and Elijah (Gen. 5:24; 2 Kgdms. 2:11, LXX); the bush that burned without being consumed (Ex. 3:2); and the Red Sea that was divided without losing its consistency as water (Ex. 14:1–31).²⁵ Christ’s innovation of the human *tropos* thus has for Maximus far-reaching implications. It is the secret underlying the Creator’s renovations of, and innovations in, the cosmos as a whole.

The Baptism of Jesus as a Cosmic Event

The rationale of Jesus’ baptism posed its own interpretive challenges in the early church, though I shall forego detailing these in order to focus on how some major early Christian thinkers understood the positive role of his baptism in the inauguration of the new creation.²⁶ Everett Ferguson, however, has rightly pointed to the fourth-century opinions of Gregory Nazianzen and Ambrose as ultimately representative, though the same basic view goes back to Clement of Alexandria: Jesus, not needing a baptism of repentance for himself, was baptized purely for *our* benefit and to sanctify the waters of *our* baptism.²⁷

²⁴ Ibid. (PG 91:1321B), trans. Blowers and Wilken, *On the Cosmic Mystery of Jesus Christ*, 85.

²⁵ Ibid. (PG 91:1344A–1345A), trans. Blowers and Wilken, *On the Cosmic Mystery of Jesus Christ*, 90–1; cf. also Maximus, *Amb.* 5 (CCSG 48:23–4).

²⁶ On patristic approaches to the rationale of Jesus’ baptism, see Daniel Bertrand, *Le baptême de Jésus: Histoire de l’exégèse aux deux premiers siècles* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1973); Daniel Vigne, *Christ au Jourdain: Le Baptême de Jésus dans la tradition judéo-chrétienne* (Paris: J. Gabalda, 1992); Pierre-Thomas Camelot, *La spiritualité du baptême: Baptisés dans l’eau et l’Esprit*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Cerf, 1993), 245–66; Robert Wilken, “The Interpretation of the Baptism of Jesus in the Later Fathers,” in F.L. Cross, ed., *Studia Patristica* 11, TU 108 (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1972), 268–77; Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 113–31; and esp. Kilian McDonnell, *The Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan: The Trinitarian and Cosmic Order of Salvation* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press/Michael Glazier, 1996), 29–247. In what follows below I have made abundant use of McDonnell’s fine study, which does justice to the Syriac and Armenian as well as Greek and Latin patristic sources.

²⁷ cf. Clement of Alexandria, *Eclogae propheticæ* 7.1–3 (GCS 17:138); Athanasius, *Or. c. Arianos* 1.47 (PG 26:108C–109C); Gregory Nazianzen, *Or.* 29.20 (= *Or. theol.* 3.20) (SC 250:220); id., *Or.* 38.16 (SC 358:140–2); id., *Or.* 39.15 (SC 358:182–4); Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Frag.* 14 in Matt. 3:15–17, in Joseph Reuss, ed., *Matthäus-Kommentare aus der griechischen Kirche*, TU 61 (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1957), 101. In the Latin tradition, cf. Ambrose, *Expos. in Lucam* 2.83; 4.5, 6 (CSEL 32.4:87, 141); Hilary of Poitiers, *Comm. in Matt.* 2.5 (PL 9:927A); Augustine (Serm. 135.4, PL 39:2012); id., *De peccatorum meritis et remissione et de baptismo parvulorum* 2.24.38 (CSEL 60:109–11); Jerome, *Comm. in Matt.* 1.3.13 (SC 242:92–4); and

This was a theme consistently echoed in episcopal preaching to catechumens and neophytes and, not surprisingly, in homilies for Epiphany.²⁸

Educing just how Jesus' baptism sanctified all baptismal waters for all time prompted some Christian commentators from very early on to insinuate links between the Jordan event and Christ's original role in creation. Tertullian did not need to do so since in his view the "hovering" Holy Spirit had already sanctified all waters at the beginning of creation (Gen. 1:2), instilling in the very *genus* of water the sacramental grace later to be communicated in baptism.²⁹ Irenaeus takes a different tack. He asserts that the Father originally anointed the Son as "Christ" before his incarnation because through the Son he "anointed and adorned" the whole of creation; subsequently, within the economy, he anointed the Son's humanity (at his baptism) with "the Spirit of God his Father."³⁰ Irenaeus thus recognizes a continuum of "anointment" between creation and new creation, with the church itself, bearer of the mystery of baptism, as the true Paradise on earth and earnest of the new creation.³¹ The Son, the Anointed, carries forward the Trinity's work of anointing the whole creation, first at the inception of the world and then in his own baptism. All others' baptism for the remission of sins is, in turn, a "regeneration unto God the Father through his Son by the Holy Spirit"³² and a sharing in "the abundance of [Christ's] anointment" (*abundantia unctionis eius*).³³

Later on other patristic interpreters graphically amplified the correspondences between the waters of creation and the recreative waters of the Jordan, inspiring an extensive mythology of the Jordan as the veritable "cosmic river" flowing from the original Paradise to a greater, eschatological Paradise.³⁴

Maximus of Turin, *Serm.* 13A.3 (CCSL 23:45–6). See also the discussion in Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 114–16.

²⁸ e.g. Cyril of Jerusalem, *Cat.* 3.11 (PG 33:442A–B); *ibid.* 12.15 (742A–B); Gregory of Nyssa, *Or. in baptismum Christi* (GNO 9:223–4); John Chrysostom, *De Epiphania* (Bodleian Library, Oxford, MSS Barocci 147 and Holkham gr. 22), trans. Thomas Carroll and Thomas Halton, *Liturgical Practice in the Fathers*, MFOC 21 (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1988), 183–4; (Pseudo-)Ephrem, *Hymni in epiphaniam* 4.1–13; 5.1–15; 6.1–20; 9.1–14; 10.12; 11.2; 12.1–7; 14.1–50 (CSCO 186:154–6, 158–63, 176–80, 183, 185, 187–8); Peter Chrysologus, *Serm.* 160.3–4 (CCSL 24B:991); Narsai, *Hom. de epiphania*, ll. 289–96, 367–78 (PO 40.1:88, 92).

²⁹ *De baptismo* 4 (Evans, 8–10).

³⁰ *Epideixis* 53 (PO 12.5:700; Behr, 75); *Adv. haer.* 3.9.3 (SC 211:106–12); cf. even earlier Justin, 2 *Apol.* 5[6] (Minns and Parvis, 286); and later Athanasius, *Or. c. Arianos* 1.47 (PG 26:108C–109C). Origen, however, in his *Comm. in Johannem* 1.28.191–5 (GCS 10:35–6) restricts the title "Christ" (Anointed) exclusively to the Son's perfect humanity and mentions no pre-incarnate anointment. See also McDonnell, *The Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan*, 57–60, 243; Daniel Smith, "Irenaeus and the Baptism of Jesus," *Theological Studies* 58 (1997): 618–42.

³¹ See McDonnell, *The Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan*, 120–3.

³² *Epideixis* 7 (PO 12.5:664–5; Behr, 44).

³³ *Adv. haer.* 3.9.3 (SC 211:112).

³⁴ On this theme see McDonnell, *The Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan*, 145–55, with numerous cited texts; also Jean Daniélou, *The Bible and the Liturgy* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1956), 99–113.

"For Jordan alone of rivers," writes Gregory of Nyssa, "receiving in itself the first-fruits of sanctification and benediction, conveyed in its channel to the whole world, as it were from some fount in the type afforded by itself, the grace of baptism."³⁵ Jordan is the "river of grace" that "encircles the whole inhabited earth and empties into Paradise" but then "flows against the current of the four rivers (Gen. 2:10–14)" and "draws back into Paradise things far more honorable than what came out of it."³⁶

Uniquely in the Jordan, the triune Creator was expanding the salvific agency of water. The author of the treatise on the Trinity uncertainly ascribed to Didymus the Blind, for example, juxtaposes the Spirit's presiding over the waters of creation (Gen. 1:2) and the Spirit's descent onto the Jordan River at Jesus' baptism.³⁷ Here the Spirit's anointing of the waters—a motif that survives in Eastern Christian pre-baptismal rites in the mixing of oil into the baptismal waters—seems at first to overshadow the anointment of Jesus himself. But doubtless the author's intention is to accentuate the work of the Holy Spirit and to reinforce the sacramentality of water for all baptism rather than to undermine Christ's own initiative in rendering his baptism efficacious for others. Particularly in the Syriac and Armenian patristic traditions, as Kilian McDonnell and Sebastian Brock have demonstrated in separate studies, theologians concentrated precisely on Christ's own deliberate action in the Jordan to convert water once more into an agent of cosmic transformation and new creation.³⁸ Much like Ephrem, who speaks of the waters of heaven and earth being "envious" of the Jordan at Jesus' baptism,³⁹ Jacob of Serug envisions Christ stepping into the Jordan and all bodies of water worldwide gravitating to him to receive his blessing.⁴⁰ Indeed, Jacob expressly denies that the Spirit anoints the Jordan; it is Christ, the incarnate Lord, who sanctifies the waters by entering them, with the Spirit descending only to confirm his identity as Christ.⁴¹

³⁵ *Or. in baptismum Christi* (GNO 9:), trans. NPNF² 5:178.

³⁶ *Or. adversus eos qui different baptismum* (PG 46:420C–D). On baptism as conveying for Gregory the whole mystery of the cosmic economy, see Ilaria Ramelli, "Baptism in Gregory of Nyssa's Theology and Its Orientation to Eschatology," in David Hellholm et al., eds., *Ablution, Initiation, and Baptism: Late Antiquity, Early Judaism, and Early Christianity* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2011), 2:1205–31.

³⁷ *De Trinitate* 2.14 (PG 39:692C–693A).

³⁸ See McDonnell, *The Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan*, esp. 50–68, 101–55; Brock, "Baptismal Themes in the Writings of Jacob of Serugh," in *Symposium Syriacum 1976*, OCA 205 (Rome: Pontificum Institutum Orientalium Studiorum, 1978), 325–47.

³⁹ *Hymnus in Epiphaniam* 6.3 (CSCO 186:160).

⁴⁰ *Hom. 8 (on the Baptism of the Lord)*, ed. Paul Bedjan, *Homiliae Selectae Mar-Jacobi Sarugensis* (Leipzig: Otto Harrassowitz, 1905), 1:188. See also Brock, "Baptismal Themes in Jacob of Serugh," 326–7.

⁴¹ *Hom. 7 (on the Three Baptisms)* (Bedjan, 1:159); cf. Romanos the Melodist, *Kontakion* 5.11 (*de baptismo Christi*) (Maas and Trypanis, 38), suggesting that Jesus himself opened the heavens and commanded the Spirit to descend.

The anonymous Armenian catechism called *The Teaching of St. Gregory*, dating probably from the late fifth century, frames Jesus' active role in his own baptism against the backdrop of the larger divine economy, proposing that while the Spirit had originally brought order out of the chaos of the waters at the beginning of creation, human sin intervened and debilitated the world's material elements until Jesus in the Jordan, together with the Spirit, sanctified the waters to give them the power to renew all of creation.⁴² The same Christ who "made the earth first emerge from the waters (Gen. 1:9) by his command," and who used the waters to nourish and fatten plants and animals alike, also through his baptism "made verdant the womb of generation of the waters, purifying by the waters and renewing the old deteriorated earthly matter, which sin had weakened and enfeebled and deprived of the grace of the Spirit."⁴³

Treading the waters with his own footsteps, [Christ] sanctified them and made them purifying. And just as formerly the Spirit moved over the waters (cf. Gen. 1:2), in the same way he will dwell in the waters and will receive all who are born by [the Spirit]. And the waters massed together above (cf. Gen. 1:6–7) are the dwelling of the angels. But he made these waters just as those, because he himself came down to the waters, that all might be renewed through the Spirit by the waters and become angels, and the same Spirit might bring all to adoption (Rom. 8:15, 23; 9:4; Gal. 4:5; Eph. 1:5) by the waters forever. For he opened the gates of the waters below, that the gates of the upper waters of heaven might be opened, and that he might elevate all human beings in glory to adoption.⁴⁴

A variation on this theme is the paralleling of Jesus' voluntary descent into the waters of the Jordan and his descent into hell or Sheol or the abyss, the realm of darkness, captivity, and death. The connection might seem far-fetched were it not for the fact that in the Bible water is already associated with the forces of chaos and the watery "abyss" harbors demonic powers (cf. Luke 8:31; Rev. 9:1; 17:8; 20:1).⁴⁵ Deploying Job's image of Behemoth, the sea dragon who was allegedly confident that the Jordan would flow right into his mouth (Job 40:23), Cyril of Jerusalem dramatizes Jesus' descent into the Jordan as purposed to vanquish this chaos monster, a guise of Satan himself, so that it could no longer swallow those who go down into the waters of baptism.⁴⁶ Here Cyril sounds a deep biblical chord insofar as Scripture itself

⁴² *The Teaching of St. Gregory* 411–13, ed. and trans. Robert Thomson, revised ed. (New Rochelle, NY: St. Nersess Armenian Seminary, 2001), 121–2.

⁴³ Ibid. 412 (Thomson, 121–2).

⁴⁴ Ibid. 414 (Thomson, 122–3) (translation slightly modified).

⁴⁵ See McDonnell, *The Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan*, 156–7.

⁴⁶ *Cat.* 3.11–12 (PG 33:441A–444A); cf. *ibid.* 14.17 (845B–848A), where Cyril dramatizes Jesus' voluntary three-day burial in the earth (Matt. 12:40) as a descent to vanquish the "noetic sea-monster of death," a feat that Jonah himself, passive to the overwhelming power of that monster, could never have accomplished.

consistently portrays creation and redemption as the Creator's enduring project of taming chaos in its elemental and moral manifestations. The image of Jesus' baptismal *descensus*, paralleling his descent into hell after death on the cross and contrasting with his bodily *ascensus* through the heavens after his resurrection, dramatizes all the more the Savior's traversing of all levels of creation, leaving no domain of creation untouched by the grace of his incarnation.

In Ephrem, a master of collapsing together various biblical types and symbols, there is a strong intrinsic connection between the incarnation proper (virgin birth), the baptism, and the death of Christ each as a "womb" of his "journey into Sheol" to rescue creation, and so too as a matrix of creaturely transformation and deification.⁴⁷ Jordan constitutes a moist womb in which Christ is at once passive and active, passive on creatures' behalf to the purifying and sanctifying waters when he himself needs no cleansing,⁴⁸ but active in mixing the Spirit into the waters and "clothing" himself with baptismal water in order to draw all baptism out of the waters of the Jordan.⁴⁹ An *incarnational* grace was communicated through the waters of baptism to new creatures in Christ. In this same vein Narsai extols Christ in his baptism as the "painter" or "artist" who has thoroughly recast human nature, enhancing the image of God and removing mortality. Even before he created the world and brought human nature into being, says Narsai, Christ willed to refashion it through baptism.⁵⁰

Two other Syriac Christian sources of very different periods set in bold relief the fuller *cosmic* repercussions of Christ's virgin birth, baptism, and descent into Sheol. The *Odes of Solomon*, from possibly as early as the second century, depict creation in anxious anticipation of the baptism of Jesus, with the creatures of the abyss and of the wider earth either condemned to judgment or exonerated by holiness when the Savior entered the waters:

The dove fluttered over the head of our Lord Messiah, because he was her head.
And she sang over him, and her voice was heard.
Then the inhabitants were afraid, and the foreigners were disturbed.
The bird began to fly, and every creeping thing died in its hole.
And the chasms were opened and closed; and they were seeking the Lord as those

⁴⁷ Ephrem actually speaks of four "wombs" of Christ: the divine Father's, the Virgin's, the Jordan's, and Sheol's. See esp. *Sermo de Domino nostro* 2 (CSCO 270:2); *Carmina Nisibena* 37.4 (CSCO 240:16); *Hymnus in epiph.* 10.9 (CSCO 186:182); cf. Narsai, *Hom. de epiphania*, ll. 55, 106, 127, 143, 294, 297, 541 (PO 40.1:74, 76, 78, 88, 104). For extensive coverage of this theme in Ephrem, see Buchan, "Blessed Is He Who Has Brought Adam from Sheol," 78–106, with abundant citations; also Serafim Seppälä, "Baptismal Mystery in St. Ephrem the Syrian and *Hymnen de Epiphania*," in Hellholm et al., *Ablution, Initiation, and Baptism*, 2:1139–77, and esp. 1145–50 ("The Baptism of Christ as Cosmic Mystery").

⁴⁸ *Hymnus de ecclesia* 36.3 (CSCO 198:90–1).

⁴⁹ *Serm. de Dom nost.* 55 (CSCO 270:51–2).

⁵⁰ *Hom. de baptismo* 22, trans. R.H. Connolly, *The Liturgical Homilies of Narsai* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1909), 33; cf. *Hom. de epiphania*, ll. 5–9 (PO 40.1:70).

who are about to give birth.

But he was not given to them for nourishment, because he did not belong to them.
But the chasms were submerged in the seal of the Lord, and they perished in the
thought with which they had remained from the beginning.

For they were in labor from the beginning, and the end of their travail was life.

And all of them who were lacking perished, because they were not able to
express

the word so that they might remain.

And the Lord destroyed the devices, of all those who had not the truth with
them.

For they were lacking in wisdom, they who exalted themselves in their mind.

So they were rejected, because the truth was not with them.

For the Lord revealed his way, and spread widely his grace.

And those who understood it knew his holiness.

Hallelujah.⁵¹

Later the Syrian Monophysite bishop and theologian Philoxenus of Mabbug (d. 523) reintroduces the “groaning” or travail of creation (Rom. 8:22) for Jesus’ baptism hinted at in the *Odes*. Like Ephrem he tightens the relation between the virginal and baptismal births of Jesus as catalysts of the healing of creation. In a striking exegesis in his *Commentary on Matthew-Luke*, Philoxenus contrasts the “descending” genealogy of Christ in Matthew 1:1–18, which develops from the Patriarchs down to the carnal birth of Jesus, and the “ascending” genealogy in Luke 3:21–38, which instead moves from Jesus’ baptism all the way back up to God himself. From this Philoxenus deduces that while the first relates to the prelapsarian Adamic identity of Jesus together with those who belong to his body, the second relates to the profound renewal and transformation of the groaning creation that Christ effected in his own baptism and, by extension, in the baptism of all those adopted as “sons of God” (cf. Rom. 8:23).⁵² In addition, Philoxenus envisions the graces of Jesus’ baptism being further stretched from its human beneficiaries even to non-human creation in eschatological fulfillment of the will of the Creator:

Through his renewing (activity) which (changes) death into life and the corruptible into incorruptibility, [creatures] also attain an amazing restoration and transformation. Groans are changed into shouts of joy, and the corruptible into corruptibility. “All created things have been groaning and in labor until today” (Rom. 8:22). While he calls this world “today” as long as it exists, all created things will groan and be in labour in it. Baptism is a type of its (i.e. the world’s) consummation in that when he was baptized Jesus fulfilled his Father’s will, and

⁵¹ *Odae Salomonis* 24, ll. 1–14, Syriac text ed. and trans. James Charlesworth, SBL Texts and Translations 13 (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1977), 97–9 (trans. slightly modified).

⁵² *Comm. in Matt-Luke*, frags. 11–13 (folios 30r–38r), Syriac text ed. and trans. Douglas Fox, *The “Matthew-Luke Commentary” of Philoxenus* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1979), 108–24, 165–77.

He created all things new, both visible and invisible. This is the mystery which was fulfilled in the baptism of our Saviour, which the Father affirmed by his voice and the Spirit by his descent.⁵³

In retrospect, Syriac writers like Ephrem, Jacob of Serug, and Philoxenus, much like their Greek and Latin patristic counterparts, framed the baptism of Jesus within the whole strategy of the incarnation, but also employed a tapestry of types and symbols that greatly enhanced the mythopoeia of its cosmic significance. Their interpretations were ultimately much more generous in including the whole of creation in longing for, dreading, revering, praising, and participating in the baptism of Jesus as one of the “staging points”⁵⁴ in the economy of creation and redemption.

Signs of the New Creation in the Miracles of Jesus

John McGuckin has suggested that in patristic thought the miracles of Jesus were generally interpreted less as signs of the presence of God or the coming of his Kingdom than as extraordinary breaches of the laws of nature, and as demonstrations less of Christ’s authority than of his unique person.⁵⁵ This summary is useful but should be adjusted on two counts. First, even if patristic interpreters did not exactly share the original purview of the Synoptic Gospels where the miracles heralded the imminent Kingdom of God, they certainly did understand the reign of God to have arrived “materially” in the incarnation so as to convert creation from within. As Rowan Greer observes: “Heaven had come down to earth, and Christ was transforming the kingdom of this world into his own realm,” which is why Christian wonderworkers continued to believe throughout late antiquity that they could tap into the supernatural power made available by Christ.⁵⁶

Second, the *authority* (ἐξουσία) of the “cosmic Christ” and the identity of his divine-human *person* were closely associated very early on and remained so. Typically patristic commentators on the Gospels saw Jesus’ thaumaturgy as showing forth his rightful divine rule over the elements and over the forces of evil operative in the cosmos. For example, in rebuking the winds and calming the storm at sea (Matt. 8:24–27 and par.), Ambrose imagines Jesus to be exhibiting both his direct command of the elements and his silencing of

⁵³ Ibid. frag. 12 (folio 31r, l. 17–31v, l. 3; Fox, 110–11, 167) (trans. slightly modified).

⁵⁴ Buchan, “Blessed Is He Who Has Brought Adam from Sheol,” 95.

⁵⁵ John McGuckin, “Miracle,” in *The Westminster Handbook to Patristic Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 224. Similarly, see Robert Grant, *Miracle and Natural Law in Graeco-Roman and Early Christian Thought* (Amsterdam: North-Holland Publishing, 1952), esp. 209–20.

⁵⁶ Rowan Greer, *The Fear of Freedom: A Study of Miracles in the Roman Imperial Church* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1989), 5.

unclean spirits (Luke 4:36).⁵⁷ Peter Chrysologus similarly declares in a sermon on Matthew's version:

[The disciples] ran in fear to the very Pilot of the world, the Ruler of the universe, the Master of the elements . . . At length, his mere command controlled the sea, struck back the winds, stopped the whirlwinds, brought back the calm. Then the men who were crossing the sea perceived, believed, and acknowledged that he is the very Creator of everything.⁵⁸

It was not lost on these exegetes that in the Synoptic Gospels the pacifying of the storm is followed immediately by the story of the healing of a demoniac and the casting of the evil spirit into swine to be drowned in the sea (Matt. 8:28–34 and par.). Ephrem sees a similar lesson in Jesus' walking on the water (Matt. 14:25ff) and thus fulfilling the Psalm: "The waters saw you and trembled, and the depths too were stirred up . . . Your pathways are on many waters, and your footsteps are not known" (Ps. 77:16,19).⁵⁹

Particularly in the wake of the christological controversies of late antiquity, we find a dramatically increased emphasis on the properly christopractic initiative in these signs and wonders. While Augustine can still say in the same breath that God the Father created the world and performed miracles through his Word *and* that "the God Jesus" (*Deum Iesum*) did these things,⁶⁰ Gregory Nazianzen shows a decided turn toward stressing the unitary subjectivity of Christ,⁶¹ as does Cyril of Alexandria in contending for Christ's "one nature" (μὴ φύσις) and describing his unique person (ὑπόστασις).⁶² After Chalcedon certain theologians, especially in the East, referred all the more intently to the "composite person" (ὑπόστασις σύνθετος) of Christ as the primary subject of his virgin birth and baptism and thus too of his miracles. His composite person "owns" the mystery of his united natures and wills, and coordinates within himself, through the mutual communication of divine and human attributes (*communicatio idiomatum*), a new "communion" between uncreated and created natures. Maximus the Confessor (drawing from Dionysius the Areopagite) speaks in this connection of the "new theandric energy"

⁵⁷ *Expos. in Lucam* 4.68–9 (CSEL 32.4:174); also *De fide* 4.4.45–4.5.47 (CSEL 78:172–3), where Ambrose argues against Arians that the calming of the sea and other miracles prove that the Son can initiate "divine" acts on his own without dependence on the Father, just as conversely the Father does not create the world apart from the Son.

⁵⁸ *Serm.* 20 (CCSL 24A:117), trans. George Ganss, FOTC 17:62. Also cf. Jerome, *Comm. in Matt.* 1.8.24–6 (SC 242:162).

⁵⁹ *Comm. in Diatessaron* 12.9, in Carmel McCarthy, *Saint Ephrem's Commentary on Tatian's Diatessaron: An English Translation of Chester Beatty Syriac MS 709 with Introduction and Notes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 194.

⁶⁰ See e.g. Augustine, *Tract. in Johannem* 8.2–3 (CCSL 36:82–3).

⁶¹ e.g. *Or.* 37.2 (SC 318:272–4). For close analysis of this concern in Gregory, see Christopher Beeley, *Gregory of Nazianzus on the Trinity and the Knowledge of God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 128–43.

⁶² See especially Cyril's *Quod unus sit Christus* (SC 97:302–514).

(καὶνὴ θεανδρική ἐνέργεια) of Jesus Christ,⁶³ whereby he “instituted anew” (καινοτομήσας) not only human nature, as revealed in the miracle of his virginal conception and birth,⁶⁴ but the natures of all other created things as well.⁶⁵ The miracle of walking on water is a case in point, where Christ, showing his power to do human things “divinely,” altered the mode (τρόπος) of the nature of water in conjunction with the altered mode of his own humanity:

“He also did human things in a way that transcends humanity”, having dispassionately instituted anew the nature of the elements in their very foundations. “And he” clearly “shows unstable water, which is unable to bear the weight of material and earthly feet, as unyielding, but he does this by a power beyond the nature of the element which he shows to hold together undiffused”, since truly “with unwetted feet which have bodily bulk and the weight of matter, he traversed” with ease “the wet and unstable substance”, walking upon the sea (Matt. 14:26; Mark 6:48–49; John 6:19) as upon dry land. By virtue of this traversal he manifests without separation the natural activity of his flesh together with the power of his own divinity, since the facility of movement belonged to the flesh by nature, but not to the divinity beyond infinity, which is hypostatically united to it.⁶⁶

What Maximus describes here sounds like Newton’s third law of motion, that when one body (Jesus’ moving body) exerts force on another (the water), the latter exerts an opposing equal force. For Maximus, however, the composite hypostasis of Christ simultaneously activated both forces. He and Dionysius, in their respective ways, coordinate quite keenly between Jesus’ individual miraculous acts and his larger cosmic ministry and rule. As Dionysius asserts, it is Jesus, the incarnate Lord, who definitively brings about “theurgy” (θεουργία), the creative, sanctifying, unifying, and perfecting divine action in the world.⁶⁷

⁶³ *Amb.* 5 (CCSG 48:29–34); cf. Dionysius, *Ep.* 4 (PTS 36:161). For the same notion along strictly Monophysite lines (which was unacceptable to Maximus), see also Severus of Antioch, *Ep. ad Johannem ducem*, ed. Franz Diekamp, *Doctrina patrum de incarnatione Verbi*, 2nd ed. (reprinted Münster: Aschendorff, 1981), 24:15–25.

⁶⁴ *Amb.* 5 (CCSG 48:22–3).

⁶⁵ As the text of his *Amb.* 5 (CCSG 48:22–5) bears out, the “instituting anew” (καινοτομήσας) of natures, a phrase Maximus appropriates from Gregory Nazianzen, *Or.* 39.13 (SC 358:176), and which he also used in *Opusc. theol. et pol.* 3 (PG 91:48C) and in the earlier text of *Amb.* 41 (PG 91:1308C–D), signifies not a violation of the integrity of natures per se but an innovation in their “mode” (τρόπος) of being.

⁶⁶ *Amb.* 5 (CCSG 48:23), trans. Joshua Lollar, *Maximus the Confessor: Ambigua to Thomas; Second Letter to Thomas*, Corpus Christianorum in Translation 2 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2009), 65. Maximus is here quoting from Dionysius, *De div. nom.* 2.9 (= PTS 33:133); *Ep.* 4 (= PTS 36:161).

⁶⁷ cf. *De eccl. hier.* 3.4 (PTS 36:83, l. 20): τὰς ἀνδρικός Ἰησοῦ θεουργίας; *ibid.* 4.12 (PTS 36:103). According to Alexander Golitzin, Dionysius never uses the term “theurgy” save in referring to the incarnate actions (including the death and resurrection) of Jesus Christ—a decisive shift from its normal usage in Neoplatonism. See his “‘Suddenly Christ’: The Place of Negative Theology in

While the demonstration of divine authority over the cosmos or of the unique prerogative and power of Christ's composite person proved to be important dimensions of Jesus' miracles, some of the miracles also displayed fresh creative and redemptive activity, the resourcefulness of the Creator within his economy, and the prospects of new creation. Early on Irenaeus argues that in the wedding at Cana (John 2:1–11) it was fully possible for Jesus, as Creator, to produce wine (like any other created thing) *ex nihilo*, and, while such wine would be wholesome in its own right, the wine that he created *out of water* for the marriage feast was superior (thus the steward's "innocent" acknowledgment in John 2:10). As in the multiplication of the loaves (John 6:1–14), the transmutation of water to wine is the Creator manipulating matter *de novo*, dramatizing "in these last times" that he is the one who nurtures all creation.⁶⁸ The fecundity of the Creator manifests itself in the fecundity of what is created. God can always produce something new from water, and what element could be more ancient?

Roughly two centuries later Hilary similarly comments on the miracle at Cana: "It was not a mixing; it was a creation (*creatio*), and a creation which was not a beginning, but a transformation. A weaker liquid was not obtained by admixture of a stronger element; an existing thing perished and a new thing came into being."⁶⁹ There is an analogy with Jesus' resurrection, for his earthly body was not dispersed and then created again *ex nihilo*, rather, somehow through death it assumed a new bodily character.⁷⁰ Both Gregory of Nyssa and Theodoret apply the same logic to the miraculous resurrection of bodies: it is actually easier for God to raise bodies from the dead than it was for him to create all the species of things in a single command, "for it is easier by far to renovate (*καinovουργῆσαι*) something that already existed than to create the non-existent without matter."⁷¹ Augustine in this regard thus emphasizes precisely the miraculousness of nature itself under the administration of its wise Creator. Many of the Creator's miracles, he says, entail natural phenomena that exhibit latent potencies defying human comprehension. It is only the

the Mystagogy of Dionysius Areopagites," in Michael Kessler and Christian Sheppard, eds., *Mystics: Presence and Aporia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 14.

⁶⁸ *Adv. haer.* 3.11.5 (SC 211:152–4). And cf. much later Romanos the Melodist, who in both his *Kontakion 7 on the Marriage at Cana* and *Kontakion 13 on the Multiplication of the Loaves* (Maas and Trypanis, 49–56, 94–101) portrays Jesus as the Creator deliberately demonstrating both his primordial and present provision for all created beings.

⁶⁹ *De Trinitate* 3.5 (SC 443:342), trans. NPNF² 9:63; cf. Maximus of Turin, *Serm.* 28.3; 64.1; 101.3 (CCSL 23:110, 269, 403).

⁷⁰ *De Trinitate* 3.20 (SC 443:372, ll. 34–6).

⁷¹ Theodoret, *De providentia* 9 (PG 83:736A), trans. Thomas Halton, ACW 49:131; cf. Gregory of Nyssa, *Or. 3 in sanctum Pascha* (GNO 9:255–64).

extraordinary pace of a feat like Jesus' conversion of water into wine that strikes people as truly miraculous.⁷²

Still later, Cyril of Alexandria, who sees the miracle at Cana more explicitly as a signal of the "new creation" (2 Cor. 5:17), concurs with Irenaeus, Hilary, and Theodoret: "What could possibly be difficult for him who is capable of all things? How could he who called into being all things from nothing be hard-pressed by transforming (μεταρρῶθμιζων) what he already made into whatever he so wishes?"⁷³ This particular sign, says Cyril, is a visible demonstration of Christ's remaking of humanity, first insofar as he rehabilitates marriage in this wedding context as a vehicle of human procreation, but also—and here is Cyril's spiritual interpretation—insofar as Christ is the Bridegroom who unites himself with the bride, human nature, in order to remake it from within and resurrect it (as the miracle happened on the "third day," John 2:1).⁷⁴

Jesus' healing miracles were also portrayed as potent indicators of the new creation. The healing of the blind man in John 9 is one of the consummate examples, all the more so because of the high drama that surrounds the miracle in the pericope, including the disciples' querying Jesus about whose sin "caused" the man's blindness, and the doubts of local skeptics that leads to a full investigation of the healing. Irenaeus' reading is formative once again, discerning in this miracle an incarnational (and sacramental) grace that simultaneously creates and redeems. By specifically using soil to concoct a medicinal salve Jesus intimates the creative power and the raw material that brought humanity into being in the first place (Gen. 2:7). The Creator deliberately but secretly left the man's eyes unformed in the womb so that at the opportune moment he could publicly demonstrate his primordial creative power, which is now also a redemptive power for those fallen human beings who, like the blind man, have descended bodily from Adam.⁷⁵ Jesus' command to the man to wash in the pool of Siloam (John 9:7) suggests the sacramental grace of baptismal regeneration, an explicit vector toward new creation.⁷⁶

Other patristic commentators after Irenaeus provided variations and expansions on this approach to the healing. Some took careful notice of Jesus slamming the door on the question of *why* the man had been born blind and

⁷² *De Trinitate* 3.5.11 (CCSL 50:137); cf. *De utilitate credendi* 16.34 (CSEL 25.1:43–4); *Tract. in Johannem* 24.1–3 (CCSL 36:244–5); *De civ. Dei* 10.12 (CCSL 47:286–7). Grant (*Miracle and Natural Law*, 217) justly concludes: "We may say that Augustine's view is not so much that miracles are natural as that nature is miraculous." See also, on this theme, Ayres, *Augustine and the Trinity*, 189–92.

⁷³ *Comm. in Johannem* 2 (on 2:7–10) (PG 73:228A).

⁷⁴ *Ibid.* (on 2:1–11) (PG 73:224D–229D).

⁷⁵ *Adv. haer.* 5.15.2–4 (SC 153:202–12). Von Balthasar (*Theo-Drama*, 2:146–7) cites Irenaeus' exegesis here as exemplary of the continuity of creation and redemption in patristic thought.

⁷⁶ *Adv. haer.* 5.15.3 (SC 153:208–10).

insisting that it was, here and now, purely a platform for revealing “the works of God” (τὰ ἔργα τοῦ θεοῦ, John 9:3).⁷⁷ Providence yes, but not in this case a punitive providence, had allowed the man’s blindness. A number of commentators reinforced Irenaeus’ insight that the composite salve of clay and spittle marvelously implied Christ’s original role in forming humanity from earth and adding to created human nature the grace of his incarnation.⁷⁸ It is as “Son of the Creator,” writes Ephrem, that Jesus did all manner of healing miracles: “A new creation came to be by his spittle, and the All-Sufficient set straight bodies and minds.”⁷⁹ Both Augustine and Cyril of Alexandria, among others, resort to a “figural” interpretation that interweaves the literal and spiritual dimensions of the healing, wherein Christ gestures not only a renovation of the human nature he originally created but a removal of the spiritual blindness of catechumens or more generally of all the Gentiles.⁸⁰ Cyril even sees here an adumbration of the mystery of deification, staged on the Sabbath as a sign of the eschatological age. Jesus releases the blind using the resources of created nature but also, by his spittle, “anoints” them so as to grant them a deeper mystical participation (μετοχή) in the Savior’s flesh, and commissions them to bathe in the “Siloam” of baptismal grace.⁸¹

Patristic exegetes, needless to say, were not interested exclusively in the *ontological* transformation of creatures effected through the incarnation and wonderworking of Christ. “New creation,” as we observed in the last chapter, connoted profound moral, spiritual, and ecclesial change, the existential participation in the new work that Christ was accomplishing in the bosom of creation. It is hardly surprising that a miracle like the transmutation of water into wine, among so many other examples, inspired a wide variety of applications to the life of the church (marriage, asceticism, hermeneutics,

⁷⁷ e.g. John Chrysostom, *Hom. in Johannem* 56 (PG 59.1–2:305–7); cf. Augustine, *Tract. in Johannem* 44.3 (CCSL 36:382–3); Caesarius of Arles, *Serm.* 172.1 (CCSL 104:701–2); Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Comm. in Johannem* 4.9.3–4 (Syriac recension, CSCO 115:183–6), trans. Mario Conti, ACT (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010), 84–5. In a lengthy excursus Cyril of Alexandria (*Comm. in Johannem* 6, PG 73:940D–953B) even finds in Jesus’ response a patent refutation not only of the Jews’ errant doctrine of ancestral sin but also of the Origenist speculation that bodily suffering was the consequence of the sin of preexistent souls.

⁷⁸ See Augustine, *Tract. in Johannem* 44.2 (CCSL 36:282); *ibid.* 2.16 (CCSL 36:19), where Christ’s own flesh is the “salve” for healing human blindness, and so an antidote from the same source (created nature) that Adam and his progeny had made a source of sin. Cf. also Caesarius of Arles, *Serm.* 172.3 (CCSL 104:703–4); Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Comm. in Johannem* 4.9.6 (Syriac recension, CSCO 115:187–8); Ammonius of Alexandria, *Comm. in Johannem* frag. 317, ed. Joseph Reuss, *Johannes-Kommentar aus der griechischen Kirche*, TU 89 (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1966), 276.

⁷⁹ *Hymnus de nativitate* 17.11–18 (CSCO 186:89–90), quoted at stroph 12; trans. McVey, 156.

⁸⁰ The most relevant texts here are Augustine’s *Tract. in Johannem* 44.1–17 (CCSL 36:381–8) and Cyril’s *Comm. in Johannem* 6 (PG 73:962B–965A). On this “figural” approach to the miracle in Augustine and Cyril, see William Wright IV, *Rhetoric and Theology: Figural Reading of John 9* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2009), 76–122.

⁸¹ *Comm. in Johannem* 6 (PG 73:962C–965A).

sacraments, etc.).⁸² Rowan Greer has explored many of these broader dimensions of Jesus' miracles in early Christian interpretation. Greer details how Ambrose, in particular, uses spiritual and mystical exegesis in his preaching to portray the miracles as Christ's gestures to reveal how his body the church has become an earnest of the new creation, where the once-blind Gentiles see, where healing sacramental grace is communicated, where spiritual bread is offered to the world, where liberation from spiritual death is begun, and where the highest moral and ascetical virtues are embodied.⁸³

Christ's Passion, Death, and Descent into Hell: Cosmic Renewal and the Subjugation of Evil and Death

The Cross as Immanent within the Plan of Creation

At the beginning of this chapter I noted Irenaeus' evocative image of the mythic "sixth day" on which the progenitor Adam sinned and became mortal and Christ the New Adam died. This is one among other images that Irenaeus deploys to convey the idea that creation, rebellion, death, salvation, reconciliation, and transformation are all mutually inextricable within the christocentric drama and "strategy" of the divine economy. From the perspective of creaturely freedom the history of creation appears to be marked by unpredictability, tragedy, disharmony, discontinuity, and the history of salvation must be viewed, in turn, as a complex and ongoing process of recovery from accidental developments in the theatre of the cosmos. But Irenaeus chooses—in a seemingly counterintuitive way—to accentuate the relentlessly forward-moving and seamless activity of the Creator within this thick plot, a plot that otherwise would degenerate into chaos.

For Irenaeus, moreover, it is not sufficient simply to rationalize how creaturely freedom, disobedience, sin, and mortality can be enfolded into a coherent scheme of God's permissive will and educative providence in the interest of a theodicy. He wants to assert *a fortiori* that the Creator, even before founding the world, intended to use death itself creatively, as an instrument of new life, and that the scheme of *salvation* constituted the *a priori* motivation for creation.⁸⁴ It was to the Crucified, the "Lamb who was slain," says Irenaeus,

⁸² On the broad ramifications of this miracle, see the fine study of Jean-Noël Guinot, "Les lectures patristiques grecques (III^e–V^e siècles) du miracle de Cana (Jn 2,1–11): Constantes et développements christologiques," in Elizabeth Livingstone, ed., *Studia Patristica* 30 (Leuven: Peeters, 1997), 28–41.

⁸³ See Greer, *The Fear of Freedom*, 36–42 (with abundant citations from Ambrose); on other patristic commentators and preachers as well, *ibid.*, 8–87.

⁸⁴ Thus Irenaeus' arresting statement in *Adv. haer.* 3.22.3 (SC 211:438), that "insofar as [the Creator] preexisted as the one who saves, it was necessary that what would be saved should also come into existence, in order that the Savior should not exist in vain."

that the Father opened the “book” containing the secrets of “heaven and earth.”⁸⁵ In recent scholarship John Behr has placed this Irenaean theme in bold relief.⁸⁶ He emphasizes how Irenaeus and certain other early Christian writers began their interpretation of the divine economy with the “solution” (i.e. the redemptive incarnation and death of Jesus Christ) rather than the “problem” (an alienated creation). They sought theologically to emulate the realism of the Bible, in which “the fall” and “death” were not abstractions but elements in a cosmic drama of salvation in which the church, like the pre-Christian biblical saints, was already thoroughly implicated. When Paul himself reconstructed “salvation history,” as Behr observes, it was not a nexus of historical events such as how moderns conceive “history,” but a perspective on the divine economy from the standpoint of the cross that radically revises our view of why God created the world.⁸⁷ Salvation for Irenaeus is not an emergency maneuver in which the Creator-Savior submits passively to the tragic necessity of a vicarious death. His suffering is “voluntarily undertaken and, as such, is creative, making all things new (Rev. 21:5).”⁸⁸ In Irenaeus’ own words, Christ suffered on the sixth day, “thereby granting [Adam] a second creation (*secundam plasmationem*) by means of his passion (*per suam passionem*), which is a recreation from out of his death (*a morte*).”⁸⁹ Adam’s fault then becomes a *felix culpa* not because God predestined Adam to sin but because, in the light of the glorious ignominy of the cross, his lapse appears an opportune catalyst for disclosing the fullness of creative and redemptive grace.

Whatever philosophical difficulties lie in such reasoning, it has the advantage theologically of privileging the scandal of the cross (cf. 1 Cor. 1:18–2:16) as key to the divine Wisdom operative in creation. In this regard Behr cites an extraordinary elucidation from the seventh-century Syriac sage Isaac of Nineveh that falls thoroughly in line with Irenaeus’ logic:

We do not speak of a power in the Cross that is any different from that through which the worlds came into being, (a power) which is eternal and without beginning and which guides creation all the time without any break, in a divine way and beyond the understanding of all, in accordance with the will of his divinity.⁹⁰

Athanasius too argues for the immanence of the cross in the divine plan of creation, declaring that the one through whom the world was created was

⁸⁵ *Adv. haer.* 4.20.2 (SC 100:628–30).

⁸⁶ John Behr, *The Mystery of Christ: Life in Death* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2006), esp. 73–114; cf. also Daniel Wanke, *Das Kreuz Christi bei Irenäus von Lyon* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2000), esp. 143–339.

⁸⁷ Behr, *The Mystery of Christ*, 77–86; also Bouteneff, *Beginnings*, 81.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 75.

⁸⁹ *Adv. haer.* 5.23.2 (SC 153:292); emphasis added in translation.

⁹⁰ Isaac of Nineve, *The Second Part* 11.3 (CSCO 554:43–4), trans. Sebastian Brock (CSCO 555:53).

Jesus Christ as Savior.⁹¹ He plays up the Irenaeus theme of the immediacy of the triune Creator's nurturing interaction with a creation which, from the very outset of its production *ex nihilo*, has required "God's beneficent movement to protect creation from its inherent ontological poverty."⁹² Accordingly, in Athanasius' paired treatises *Against the Pagans* and *On the Incarnation*, which together constitute a kind of *apologia crucis*, divine condescension to the point of death for purposes of fostering and renewing the corruptible creation becomes the operative paradigm of an entire Christian cosmology.⁹³ The upshot in Irenaeus and Athanasius is a rich improvisation on a significant leitmotif from the Gospel of John: the revelation of divine glory (δόξα), not only in the founding of the world but in the profound depth of God's self-sacrifice on its behalf, is the very teleology of creation.⁹⁴

This cross-centered logic of the incarnation—and of creation itself—reappears in earnest in the Cappadocian Fathers, Gregory of Nyssa in particular:

Perhaps whoever would precisely scrutinize the mystery [of the incarnation] would more reasonably say that, rather than his death transpiring in consequence of his birth, Christ on the contrary accepted birth for the sake of dying. For he who lives eternally did not abase himself to bodily birth out of a need to live, but to call us back from death to life.⁹⁵

Gregory also expands on the assertion of Irenaeus, and Justin before him, that the configuration (σχήμα) of the cross was both inscribed in, and embracing of, the "height, depth, length, and breadth" (Eph. 3:18) of all creation in God's creative and redemptive economy. For Irenaeus, the four arms of the cross jutting in all directions bespeak at once Christ's invisible activity in the "heights" of heaven and his visible activity in the "depths" beneath the earth, as well as in East and West ("length") and in North and South ("breadth").⁹⁶

⁹¹ C. *gentes* 2 (Thomson, 6).

⁹² Anatolios, *Athanasius: The Coherence of His Thought*, 23–5, 35–84 (quoted at p. 84); on Irenaeus, *ibid.*, 21–3; also Osborn, *Irenaeus of Lyons*, 22, 27, 31, 55, 69, 73, 262–3 (on the "immediacy" of God in Irenaeus).

⁹³ See esp. *De incarn.* 9–16, 21–9 (Thomson, 152–72, 184–206). See also Anatolios, *Athanasius: The Coherence of His Thought*, 28–30; Behr, *The Nicene Faith*, 168–207.

⁹⁴ cf. Irenaeus, *Adv. haer.* 4.20.1 (SC 100:624–6), suggesting that creatures, as their very salvation, are ordained to participate with Christ (the Crucified Savior) in glorifying the Father-Creator with the glory that Christ already shared with him before the world was founded (John. 17:5); Athanasius in his turn consistently refers to the revelation and vindication of the Creator's power (δύναμις) and glory (δόξα) in creation: e.g. C. *gentes* 1, 6, 19, 27, 35, 42, 44, 46 (Thomson, 2–4, 16, 52, 72, 94–6, 114–18, 130); *De incarn.* 6–7, 13, 26 (Thomson, 146–50, 164, 196–8).

⁹⁵ *Or. catech.* (GNO 3.4:77–8).

⁹⁶ Irenaeus, *Epideixis* 34 (PO 12.5:685–6); cf. Justin, *1 Apol.* 60 (Minns and Parvis, 234); *Dial. c. Tryphone* 91.2 (Bobichon, 434). Justin himself draws directly on Plato's image in *Timaeus* 36b of the World Soul (whom Justin instead identifies as the divine Son, or Logos) being affixed crosswise in the universe. Justin understands Plato's image as a plagiarism of the story of Moses affixing a bronze serpent crosswise to a pole (Num. 21:8–9). On the formative mystical traditions

For Nyssen too, the shape of the cross indicates the Creator-Christ's governance and preservation of his universal creatures, intelligible and sensible alike, and his will to raise them to a higher knowledge of his power which, again, extends to height, depth, length, and breadth (Eph. 3:18).⁹⁷

Syriac writers, meanwhile, picked up and amplified the early patristic identifications of the cross as the true cosmic Tree of Life, the pure fruit of which was the grace-filled grape or else the olive (oil) communicated to the world through the sacraments of the church.⁹⁸ Among the Latin commentators, Ambrose imagines creation and human history virtually in a state of suspended animation when Christ mounts the cross as his cosmic trophy (*tropaeum*), since at that moment, "he hangs the captive spoils of the ages on his triumphal scaffold."⁹⁹ In this dramatic instant of his cosmic victory, through the eyes of faith:

... we see the cheering populace of nations, brought back not for torment but for reward, kings worshiping with unforced affection, cities dedicated with willing zeal and the statues from the towns molded into a better shape, their dyed features giving way to the color of devout faith. Arms we see, and the laws of the victor traversing the whole earth, the prince of this world a captive and the spirits of wickedness that are in high places (Eph. 6:12) obeying the command of a human voice. The powers are subdued, and the various forms of virtue shine forth in our conduct, not in silken robes. Chastity blazes, faith is resplendent, and devout courage, though it puts on the weeds of death, rises again. A single triumph of God, the cross of the Lord, has caused almost all human beings to triumph. It is therefore opportune to consider in what guise he mounts it. I see him naked: that then is the way that one mounts if one is preparing to overcome the world, so as to dispense with worldly aids. Adam, who sought out garments, was conquered; the conqueror is the one who put off his costume. And when he mounted he was as nature made us at God's behest; such was the first man when he lived in paradise, such was the second man when he entered into paradise. And

of the "cosmic cross," see Jean Daniélou, *A History of Early Christian Doctrine before the Council of Nicaea*, 2: *The Theology of Jewish Christianity*, trans. John Baker (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1964), 279–92; also Hugo Rahner, *Greek Myths and Christian Mystery*, trans. Brian Battershaw (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 46–68.

⁹⁷ Cf. C. Eun. 3 (GNO 2:121–2); *Or. catech.* (GNO 3.4:78–81); *De tridui spatio* (GNO 9:298–303); later John Damascene, *De fide orth.* 4.11 (PTS 12:188).

⁹⁸ Early on cf. Justin, *Dial. c. Tryphone* 86.1 (Bobichon, 420); Irenaeus, *Adv. haer.* 5.19.1 (SC 153:248); *Epideixis* 34 (PO 12.5:685–6); also *ibid.* 45 (PO 12.5:693–4), where Irenaeus sees the "tree" (cross) prophetically foreshadowed in Jacob's ladder (Gen. 28:12), a bridge between earth and heaven. Later cf. Cyril of Jerusalem, *Cat.* 13.2, 19, 28, 31, 35 (PG 33:773A, 796A–797A, 805B, 809B, 816A); John Damascene, *De fide orth.* 4.11 (PTS 12:188). On this theme in the Syriac Fathers (with abundant citations), see Robert Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom: A Study in Early Syriac Tradition*, rev. ed. (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2004), 113–30, 320–4. For further background, see Daniélou, *A History of Jewish Christianity*, 265–78.

⁹⁹ *Expos. in Lucam* 10.107–109 (CSEL 32.4:495–6); cf. John Chrysostom, (*Hom. in Johannem* 85.1, PG 59:459), describing the cross as Christ's "trophy against the tyranny of death" (τρόπαιον κατὰ τῆς τοῦ θανάτου τυραννίδος).

so that he would not conquer for himself only but for all, he extended his hands so as to draw all to him (John 12:32) so that he might release things that had hitherto been earthly from the knot of death and, suspending them from the yoke of faith, reconcile them with things in heaven.¹⁰⁰

Much later Maximus the Confessor, in his explorations of the cosmic mystery of Christ, posits that the Logos—as Jesus Christ incarnate *and crucified*, the “pure and spotless Lamb” (1 Peter 1:20)—both primordially “contained” the *logoi* of all created existents and, throughout the economy of creation and salvation, has worked to “incarnate” himself in the *logoi*.¹⁰¹ As I noted earlier, in chapter six, these *logoi* constitute the ontological principles that ground and stabilize created nature, but they also embody God’s providential “intentions” (θελήματα) for the world.¹⁰² They encode the mystery of Christ’s salvific and deifying presence in, with, and for his creatures. Sustained contemplation of them discloses to the worthy the mystery of Christ in its cosmic fullness, and yet, as Maximus states in the important caveat that I quoted from him at the heading of this chapter, only the one who “knows the mystery of the cross and the tomb knows the *logoi* of these creatures”; and only the one who “has been initiated in the ineffable power of the resurrection knows the purpose (λόγος) for which God originally made all things.”¹⁰³

For Maximus this cosmic mystery of Christ, the incarnation of the cross-destined Lord in the very fabric of the created world from beginning to end, is neither a cosmological nor a mystagogical abstraction. For it has been played out concretely and definitively in the intense drama of Jesus of Nazareth within the horizon of the Gospels,¹⁰⁴ where, as von Balthasar discerns in Maximus and other Greek theologians, the incarnation is “ordered to the Cross.”¹⁰⁵ Like Gregory Nazianzen, who depicts the passion foremost as the nadir of Christ’s incarnational condescension in a “marvelously constructed drama dealing with us,”¹⁰⁶ Maximus too envisions the whole self-emptying (κένωσις) of Christ, climaxing in his crucifixion, as a *paschal* ministry, a submission to identify in

¹⁰⁰ *Expos. in Lucam* 10.109–10 (CSEL 32.4:496–7), trans. Mark Edwards, *We Believe in the Crucified and Risen Lord*, Ancient Christian Doctrine 3 (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 133. Augustine (*Tract. in Johannem* 118.5, CCL 36:657) again connects the arms of the cross with Eph. 3:18, but in terms of moral transformation: the “breadth” of love, the “length” of perseverance to the end, the “height” to which all good works aspire, and the “depth” of divine grace that grounds Christian morality.

¹⁰¹ *Qu. Thal.* 60 (CCSG 22:73–81); *Amb.* 7 (PG 91:1084C–D).

¹⁰² *Amb.* 7 (PG 91:1085A); *Qu. Thal.* 13 (CCSG 7: 95). See also above, 162–6.

¹⁰³ *Cap. theologica et oeconomica* 1.66 (PG 90:1108A–B).

¹⁰⁴ On the historical particularity of Jesus in the Gospels as crucial in Maximus’ Christology, cosmology, and soteriology alike, see David Yeago, “Jesus of Nazareth and Cosmic Redemption: The Relevance of Maximus the Confessor,” *Modern Theology* 12 (1996): 163–93.

¹⁰⁵ *Mysterium Paschale: The Mystery of Easter*, 2nd ed., trans. Aidan Nichols (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 12–23 (quoted at p. 22).

¹⁰⁶ *Or.* 30.6 (= *Or. theol.* 4.6) (SC 250:236), trans. Lionel Wickham, *St. Gregory of Nazianzus: Of God and Christ*, PPS (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2002), 97.

creaturely passibility and suffering to the point of the ultimate passivity of death.¹⁰⁷ Precisely under this apparent constraint Christ reveals his total freedom, his “fiat,” and nowhere more vividly so than in Gethsemane, where he voluntarily hands over his deified human will once and for all to the will of the Father. Paradoxically active in his own passivity to the specter of death, Christ *uses* his human weakness, his fear, and at last death itself as the refiner’s fire for a new creation.¹⁰⁸ Passibility—the providential but provisional condition of fallen creation in its liability to chaos, to passions, to suffering, to vanity, and at last to death—thus becomes through Christ the matrix of a transformed state, a state of “well-being” (τὸ εὖ εἶναι) in anticipation of “eternal well-being” (τὸ ἀεὶ εὖ εἶναι).¹⁰⁹ The *logos-tropos* of human nature, and of each and every created being, is a miniature theatre in which this drama continues to play itself out, since all creatures universally are intended to participate in the benefits of Christ’s paschal ministry.

In the representative thinking of Irenaeus, Athanasius, the Cappadocians, the Syriac Fathers, and Maximus the privileged role of the cross in galvanizing the divine economy is not, then, a straightforward piece of theological rationalization. How could one make any simple logical case for God willing death as a prime instrument of new creation? Rather, they frame the sacrifice of Christ within a panoramic, contemplative vision (θεωρία) of the drama of divine condescension in which God’s very freedom to create the world in the first place, though unfathomable, is inseparable in human understanding from the “constraint” of the Creator’s love and urgency to preserve and renew the creation as creatures exercise their own freedom within the constraints of diastemic existence. The *narrative* unity of incarnation and passion, drawn from the purview of Scripture itself, holds precedence in projecting the teleology of creation. God created the world in order to sacrifice himself for it and thereby to bring it to perfection.

Conquering Death through Death, and Christ’s Use of Death in Renovating Creation

To amplify the paradoxically proactive role of Christ exactly in the passivity of death, these and other early Christian authors developed an extensive dramatization of Christ’s cosmic victory that liberates, reconciles, and refines creation. The Paschal Troparion of the Orthodox tradition praising Christ for

¹⁰⁷ cf. *Qu. Thal* 21 (CCSG 7:127–33); *ibid.* 42 (CCSG 7:285–9). See also Paul Blowers, “The Passion of Jesus Christ in Maximus the Confessor: A Reconsideration,” in M.F. Wiles and E. J. Yarnold, eds., *Studia Patristica* 37 (Leuven: Peeters, 2001), 361–77.

¹⁰⁸ See esp. *Expos. orat. dom.* (CCSG 23:34–5); *Opusc. theol. et pol.* 20 (PG 91:227–46); *ibid.* 6 (PG 91:65A–68D); *ibid.* 7 (PG 91:80D); *Disputatio cum Pyrrho* (PG 91:297B–300A).

¹⁰⁹ cf. *Amb.* 7 (PG 91:1073C, 1084B); *Amb.* 65 (PG 91:1392B); *Cap. theol.* 1.56 (PG 90:1104C); *Qu. Thal.* 60 (CCSG 22:79).

“trampling down death by death,” or “putting death to death” in the words of Maximus the Confessor,¹¹⁰ has deep roots in patristic convictions that the forces of darkness had to be confronted as enemies before they could be pacified and made subservient to the Creator. Numerous writers and preachers took their cues from the dramatic intensity of the passion narratives themselves, which depicted the death of Jesus as erupting an upheaval in the very foundations of creation. Leo the Great speaks representatively in a sermon for Holy Week:

For the reinforcement of our hope, the witness of all creation has been added. When Christ gave up his spirit, all the elements trembled, the brightness of the sun (obscured with thick shadows) turned the day into unnatural night, the earth (struck with deep shocks) could not keep its stability, and the firmness of rocks (their solidity broken) burst asunder. In addition, the veil of the temple (no longer to shadow the mysteries of the past) was torn, the bodies of many saints were stirred up, and—to strengthen faith in the coming resurrection—tombs were opened (Matt. 27:50–53).¹¹¹

Leo and a wide array of patristic theologians East and West also dramatized the crucified Christ’s mission to ensnare, bind, and vanquish the Devil and to break the grip of Death (itself often a personified figure) on created beings.¹¹² Some exponents, like the fourth-century Persian sage Aphrahat in one of his *Demonstrations*, play up Christ’s violent usurpation of the Devil and Death.¹¹³ Ephrem instead projects an image of pacified Death “bereaved” over losing the dead from his dominion after Christ’s arrival in Sheol.¹¹⁴ Similarly, in a staged dialogue between the Devil and Death in Romanos’ *Kontakion on the*

¹¹⁰ Maximus, *Opusc. theol. et pol.* 3 (PG 91:48B); *θανατώσας τὸν θάνατον*; also *Liber asceticus* 13 (PG 90:921C): δι’ . . . ἀσθενείας τὸν θάνατον ἐνέκρωσε.

¹¹¹ *Serm.* 53.2 (SC 74^{bis}:48–50), trans. Jane Freeland and Agnes Conway, FOTC 93:231. On creation’s “protest” at the death of the Savior, see also Ephrem, *Comm. in Diatessaron* 21.4–9 (trans. McCarthy, 319–21).

¹¹² Beyond early Christian apocryphal sources, see e.g. Melito of Sardis, *Hom. in Pascha* 68, 102 (Hall, 36, 58); *Odae Sal.* 42, ll. 11–20 (Charlesworth, 144, 145–6); Origen, *Comm. in Rom.* 5.1, 10 (Hammond Bammel 2:386–7, 448); Gregory Nazianzen, *Or.* 45.1, 22 (PG 36:624B, 653C); *Carmina de seipso* 38 (PG 37:1328A); Gregory of Nyssa, *De tridui spatio* (GNO 9:280–3; Cyril of Jerusalem, *Cat.* 14.19 (PG 33:848C–849A); Ephrem, *Sermo de Domino nostro* 3–4 (CSCO 270:3–4); id., *Comm. in Diatessaron* 20.32 (trans. McCarthy, 311); Aphrahat, *Demonstratio* 22.1–15 (PS 1.1:993–1023); Ambrosiaster, *Comm. in Eph.* 4.9 (CSEL 81.3:97–8); John Chrysostom, *Hom. in 1 Cor.* 24.4 (PG 61:203–4); id., *Hom. in Eph.* 11.2 (PG 62:81–2); Ps-Chrysostom, *Hom. Pasch.* 3 (SC 187:322–4).

¹¹³ *Dem.* 22.4–5 (PS 1.1:995–7).

¹¹⁴ *Carmina Nisibena* 37.6–8 (CSCO 218:16–17). Ephrem can also, however, portray Death as impudent and defiant toward Christ, as in *Carmina Nisibena* 36.2–10 (CSCO 218:9–12); or Death’s agents as ironically facilitating the resurrection: “You are the Living One whose killers became the sowers of your life: like a grain of wheat, they sowed it in the depths, so that it would sprout and raise up many with it” (*Serm. de Domino nostro* 9, CSCO 270:8, trans. Amar, FOTC 91:284–5). On these characterizations of Death in Ephrem, see also Buchan, “Blessed Is He Who Has Brought Adam from Sheol,” 141–7.

Crucifixion, it is chastened Death who warns the Devil that he is ultimately powerless in his deceitful designs, while Death confesses his own subservience to the crucified Lord:

For the One who was silent when being judged,
 Has me terrified in being buried.
 If he has said nothing to Pilate (Matt. 27:14),
 He makes haste to upset the kingdom below,
 He who is everywhere and fills all things . . .
 Just see what you are doing, ever-wily one,
 And do not attach yourself to me, Death;
 For I do not associate with you in your daring.
 If [Christ] gives a nod towards me, I draw near the cross;
 If he does not will it, he will not die,
 He who is everywhere and fills all things.¹¹⁵

The graphic details of Christ's mythic battle with the opposing powers, a theme that interfaces with atonement doctrine and is far too substantial to treat comprehensively here, come through not only in literary and homiletic expositions but also in early Christian liturgy, hymnody, and iconography. Some interpreters, like Narsai, understood this conquest to be foreshadowed already in Jesus' baptism, temptation, miraculous exorcisms, and raising of the dead.¹¹⁶ But its climax was his descent into hell (or Sheol) in the period between his death and resurrection.¹¹⁷ This teaching served a variety of functions, including addressing the destiny of the righteous who died before the coming of Christ,¹¹⁸ and proposing the comprehensive invitation to salvation for *all* creatures held captive to death (thus Christ's preaching to the "spirits in prison," 1 Peter 3:19).¹¹⁹ But it also accentuated the depth of divine condescension, even to the lowest reaches of the netherworld, and the Creator's utter abandon in working to free his estranged creatures from the "just" punishment of death. Famously, some patristic exegetes went so far as to

¹¹⁵ *Kontakion 21 (de crucifixione)* (Maas and Trypanis, 161, 162); trans. Carpenter, 222, 223. Cf. Ephrem, *Carmina Nisibena* 41.15–16 (CSCO 218:36), where, conversely, it is the Devil who consoles Death over his powerlessness, and the two are reduced simply to mocking Jesus in his burial.

¹¹⁶ See Narsai's *Hom. de resurrectione*, ll. 1–138 (PO 40.1:136–44).

¹¹⁷ See the very useful study of Aloys Grillmeier, "Der Gottessohn in Totenreich: Soteriologische und christologische Motivierung der Descensuslehre in der älteren christlichen Überlieferung," in Aloys Grillmeier, ed., *Mit Ihm und in Ihm: Christologische Forschungen und Perspektiven* (Freiburg: Herder, 1978), 76–174. For a good survey, principally but not exclusively of the extensive Eastern patristic literature on the descent of Christ into hell, see Hilarion Alfeyev, *Christ the Conqueror of Hell: The Descent into Hades from an Orthodox Perspective* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2009); also Gary Anderson, "The Resurrection of Adam and Eve," in Blowers et al., *In Dominico Eloquentia/In Lordly Eloquence*, 3–34.

¹¹⁸ e.g. Augustine, *Ep. 164 (ad Evodium)* (CSEL 44:521–41).

¹¹⁹ e.g. Ambrosiaster, *Comm. in Eph. 4.9* (CSEL 81.3:97–8).

depict Christ's blood as a ransom paid to Satan,¹²⁰ or his flesh as a noxious bait intended to trick Satan or Death into giving up captive creatures¹²¹—an idea already offensive to some Christian theologians even in antiquity, most notably Gregory Nazianzen,¹²² but plausible and defensible, argues Gary Anderson, since its analogue was the therapeutic use of toxins for the sick in ancient medical practice. Poisoning the Devil metaphorically facilitated the framing of Christ's resurrection as the decisive "moment of cosmic healing" from the colossal malaise of evil and death.¹²³

Christ's harrowing of hell to vanquish Satan and Death set a strong eschatological and cosmic-dramatic tone, but there remained the harsh fact that, even after Christ had risen from the dead, the human race, including believers, were still subject to physical death. Augustine specifically emphasizes that even those whose limbs and eyes Christ healed with supernatural power had met that end.¹²⁴ Death still had to play out its punitive but rehabilitative role in the economy, its agency in final judgment and eschatological renewal.¹²⁵ Thus we come full circle back to Irenaeus' insight that death was in the works even before God created the world, both as a means to train creatures that the grace of life itself could not be taken for granted and that resurrection from the dead was the ultimate salvific goal.¹²⁶ This logic took different tracks. For some it reinforced the otherworldliness of the Christian hope. Cyprian comforted his plague-stricken church with the fact that, despite death's indiscriminateness in this world, it spelled future eternal life for the faithful.¹²⁷ Others, like Origen and Gregory of Nyssa, used this logic to adjudicate the larger providential scheme of the Creator-Pedagogue who trains and purifies creatures in this world for their posthumous liberation and transformation.¹²⁸

Much later Isaac of Nineveh brings to the surface what had nonetheless remained a lingering inner tension in early Christian thought between the punitive (retributive) and the rehabilitative (transformative) functions of

¹²⁰ Origen, *Comm. in Matt.* 16.8 (GCS 40:497–501).

¹²¹ On Christ's flesh as bait, cf. Gregory of Nyssa, *Or. catech.* 24 (GNO 3.4:62); id., *De tridui spatio* (GNO 9:281); Jerome, *Ep.* 60.2 (CSEL 54:550); Rufinus of Aquileia, *Comm. in Symbolum Apostolorum* 32 (PL 21:355A–B); Maximus the Confessor, *Qu. Thal.* 64 (CCSG 22:217–19); also cf. Augustine's analogy of the cross as "mousetrap" in *Serm.* 130, 134, 163, 263.

¹²² Or. 45.22 (PG 36:653B). Gregory's rejoinder is that the Devil could not possibly be owed a ransom; nor can the Father receive a ransom upon the death of his consubstantial Son. For explanation of Gregory's important critique on this point, see Donald Winslow, *The Dynamics of Salvation: A Study in Gregory of Nazianzus* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Patristics Foundation, 1979), 107–11.

¹²³ Anderson, "The Resurrection of Adam and Eve," 17–18.

¹²⁴ Augustine, *Tract. in Johannem* 17.1 (CCSL 36:170).

¹²⁵ See Ambrose, *De excessu fratris sui Satyri* 2.44–48 (CSEL 73:272–5).

¹²⁶ See Behr, *The Mystery of Christ*, 101–2, citing Irenaeus, *Adv. haer.* 3.20.1 (SC 211:382–6).

¹²⁷ *De mortalitate* (CCSL 3A:17–32).

¹²⁸ cf. Origen, *De princ.* 3.6.5 (SC 268:244–6), commenting on 1 Cor. 15:26; Gregory of Nyssa, *De mortuis* (GNO 9:28–68); *De anima et res.* (PG 46:145C–152B).

death. When the Creator first expelled Adam and Eve from Paradise, says Isaac, he outwardly gestured to them that death was the penalty for their disobedience (cf. Gen. 3:3,22–24); but he concealed his true objective, which already in his providence was to move them out of Paradise to subjugate the whole earth, and to use death itself as a means to translate creatures from old life to new life.¹²⁹ Isaac further asserts in some of his writing that the Creator intended to use hell (Gehenna) itself for a purpose much greater than retribution or merely appeasing his wrath, to be a penultimate refiner's fire for those who will taste ultimate salvation in a universal *apokatastasis*.¹³⁰ Though other texts show Isaac more reticent to make this claim, or even embracing the possibility of everlasting death for the wicked, his struggle to pursue a favorable end for all creatures stems from a strong overarching sense that the divine economy is quintessentially constructive, not destructive, a work of love on behalf of created natures that remain intrinsically good in spite of existential evil.¹³¹

Certainly not all patristic thinkers embraced this hope that the destruction of death and hell would be absolute and that all creatures would see ultimate restoration and renewal. Framed in terms of the finality and totality of the Creator's victory over evil, such a hope seemed plausible. But while influential figures like Gregory of Nyssa and Maximus the Confessor had showed degrees of sympathy with this prospect,¹³² Tertullian and Augustine, among others,

¹²⁹ *The Second Part* 39.4–5 (CSCO 554:153–4).

¹³⁰ *Ibid.* 39.6–23 (CSCO 554:154–62). Along the way here, Isaac cites supporting evidence from Theodore of Mopsuestia and Diodore of Tarsus, both of whom were revered in the Syriac tradition.

¹³¹ For the variant angles on death and hell in Isaac, see Patrik Hagman, *The Asceticism of Isaac of Nineveh* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 197–204 (with citations).

¹³² Nyssen openly avows a universal *apokatastasis* in *De anima et res.* (PG 46:133C–136B), projecting the annihilation of evil and a cessation of variant participations in the good as *all* creatures, once purified and resurrected, will enjoy a grand banquet and a single joy. Such, he says, is foreshadowed in Ezekiel's vision of the dry bones coming to life (Ezek. 37:1–14). Also cf. *V. Moysis* lib. 2 (GNO 7.1:57–8); *In inscriptiones psalmodum* 2.16 (GNO 5:174–5). See also the analysis of these and other texts by Morwenna Ludlow, *Universal Salvation: Eschatology in the Thought of Gregory of Nyssa and Karl Rahner*, 77–111. The issue is much knottier with Maximus. In places he seems to hint at least at the *hope* of a universal restoration and final destruction of evil after purgatorial judgment (e.g. *Qu. et dub.* 19, CCSG 10:17–18; *ibid.* 159, CCSG 10:110–11; *ibid.* I,10, CCSG 10:142–3; *Expositio in Ps.* 59, CCSG 23:3–4; *Mystagogia* 7, CCSG 69:34–5; *Ep.* 4, PG 91:416C), but is unwilling to allow it as dogma, and even in some passages indicates an everlasting damnation for those who freely refuse divine grace (e.g. *Qu. et dub.* 99, CCSG 10:75–6; *Cap. in caritate* 1.56–57; 2.34, PG 90:972B–C, 996B–C; *Ep.* 24, PG 91:612B–C). Suggesting Maximus' rejection of an *apokatastasis* is Sherwood, *The Earlier Ambigua*, 205–22; and esp. Brian Daley, "Apokatastasis and 'Honorable Silence' in the Eschatology of Maximus the Confessor", in Felix Heinzer and Christoph Schönborn, eds., *Maximus Confessor: Actes du symposium sur Maxime le Confesseur, Fribourg, 2–5 septembre 1980* (Fribourg: Éditions Universitaires, 1982), 309–39. Von Balthasar maintained that Maximus embraced a universal restoration of creatures (*Cosmic Liturgy*, 354–8), mustering several texts to make his case, including *Qu. Thal.* Prol. (CCSG 7:37) and 21 (CCSG 7:129–33) on the cross as *finally* despoiling the forces of evil; and *Amb.* 65 (PG 91:1392A–D). He was respectful but unconvinced by Daley's argument, as he states in *Dare*

rejected it outright and estimated that death for the impenitent would be necessarily and finally vindictive.¹³³ Still, despite the abiding tension between the retributive and transformative agencies of death in early Christian perspectives on the destiny of creatures, and despite variant views on exactly how Christ's own death vanquished death's grip on creation, a broad consensus endured on the efficacy of the cross for recapitulating God's creative plan. John Damascene synthesizes its multiple creative and redemptive aspects as follows:

By nothing else except the cross of our Lord has death been brought low, the sin of our first parent destroyed, hell plundered, resurrection bestowed, the power given us to despise the things of this world and even death itself, the road back to the former blessedness made smooth, the gates of paradise opened, our nature seated at the right hand of God, and we made children and heirs of God. By the cross all things have been set aright. "For all we who are baptized in Christ", says the Apostle, "are baptized in his death" (Rom. 6:3) and "as many of us as have been baptized in Christ have put on Christ" (Gal. 3:27); moreover, "Christ is the power and wisdom of God" (1 Cor. 1:24). See how the death of Christ, the cross, that is to say, has clothed us with the subsistent wisdom and power of God! And the word of the cross is the power of God, whether because by it God's might, his victory over death, that is, was manifested to us, or because, just as the four arms of the cross are made solid and bound together by their central part, so are the height and the depth and the length and the breadth (Eph. 3:18), that is to say, all creation both visible and invisible, held together by the power of God.¹³⁴

Resurrection and the Remaking of Corporeality

It is natural to presume that the resurrection of Christ, along with his cross and death, immediately dominated early Christian conceptions and expectations of the new creation. And yet it took time—and much controversy—for the Gospel accounts of Jesus' resurrection and Paul's rich reflections on the mystery of the resurrection body (1 Cor. 15), and on Christ as the "first fruits" (1 Cor. 15:20, 23) and "firstborn" (Col. 1:18) from the dead, to register their *sensus plenior* in the early church. As Markus Vinzent has highlighted in a recent study, there was actually an astonishing dearth of theological

We Hope "That All Men Be Saved"? with a Short Discourse on Hell, trans. David Kipp and Lothar Krauth (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 64 (n. 38), 245–7.

¹³³ E.g. Tertullian, *Apologeticum* 45.6–7; 48.11–15, ed. Carl Becker (Munich: Kösel, 1952), 200, 216; *Ad Nationes* 1.7 (CSEL 20.1:70–1); *De resurrectione carnis* 15, Latin text ed. and trans. Ernest Evans (London: SPCK, 1960), 38–40; Augustine, *De civ. Dei* 21.17–27 (CCSL 48:783–7); *Ad Orosium contra Priscillianistas et Origenistas* 6.7 (CCSL 49:170); *Tract. in Johannem* 44.6 (CCSL 36:384).

¹³⁴ *De fide orth.* 4.11 (PTS 12:187–8), trans. Frederick Chase, FOTC 37:350 (slightly modified).

expositions of Christ's resurrection in earliest post-Pauline Christianity. Well into the second century, even some of the most celebrated Christian texts, while affirming the eschatological resurrection of the dead, did not explicate its precise connections with Christ's own resurrection. Instead, Christ's incarnate suffering and death remained the primary focus of the Paschal mystery. A turning point, argues Vinzent, was the reaction against Marcion's gospel of a wholly pneumatic resurrection, whereupon Christian writers began to recapture Paul's emphasis on Christ's own bodily resurrection.¹³⁵ This interpretive trend would intensify much more from the fourth century on, as theologians sought to expound the fuller soteriological, eschatological, and even cosmological significance of Christ's resurrection.

I shall not speculate here on all the reasons for this delay. Suffice it to say that, given the very early penchant toward viewing the whole of the incarnation, and climactically the crucifixion, as a progressive drama of the liberation and renewal of creation, and given the very early identification of Jesus' death, burial, and descent into hell as the moment when Death's domain was stormed and mortality itself was pacified and converted into an instrument of life, there was understandable reticence to isolate the resurrection itself as the Creator's true victory and the definitive turning point in the inauguration of the new creation.

Ignatius, Pseudo-Barnabas, Pseudo-Justin, Tertullian, and Pseudo-Athenagoras are some important witnesses in this regard. Vinzent embraces a very late dating of Ignatius of Antioch (ca. 150–180) and proposes that his strong statements on the physicality of Christ's resurrected body were directed against Marcion.¹³⁶ The difficulty of identifying and dating the *Epistle of Barnabas* complicates the determination of whether he wrote before or after Marcion (and so against Marcion). At any rate, the author states that Jesus rose from the dead "so that he might destroy death and demonstrate (δείξει) resurrection from the dead." His resurrection confirmed the hope for others' eschatological resurrection, while his primary salvific feat, as the text further makes clear, was incarnation and vicarious suffering.¹³⁷ The ontological connection between Christ's resurrection and others' meanwhile remained unexplored. Pseudo-Justin's *On the Resurrection*, in a protracted defense of the resurrection of the flesh, similarly proposes that the incarnate Christ, "granting us in himself the resurrection of the dead" (δοδὸς ἡμῖν ἐν ἑαυτῷ τὴν ἐκ νεκρῶν ἀνάστασιν), extended his use of material flesh right on to the point of

¹³⁵ Markus Vinzent, *Christ's Resurrection in Early Christianity and the Making of the New Testament* (Farnham, Surrey, UK; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011), 77–191. See also Reinhart Staats, "Auferstehung," II/2: *Alte Kirche, Theologische Realenzyklopädie* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1979), 4:513–29.

¹³⁶ See *Ep. Smyrn.* 2; 3.1–3; 12.2 (Holmes, 250, 260). On dating Ignatius post-Marcion, see Vinzent, *Christ's Resurrection in Early Christianity*, 104–7.

¹³⁷ *Ep. Barn.* 5.1–14 (Holmes, 390–4); quoted at 5.6 (p. 392).

raising it with him after death so as to demonstrate the resurrection of the flesh for others.¹³⁸ In his paired anti-Marcionite treatises *On the Flesh of Christ* and *On the Resurrection of the Flesh*, Tertullian also claims that the mission of Christ's resurrection was "to prove the resurrection of the dead not only by himself but even in himself" (*mortuorum certe resurrectionem non modo per semetipsum verum etiam in semetipso probare*).¹³⁹ And yet Tertullian couches resurrection expressly in the context of the economy of *incarnation* itself. It is the Savior's becoming human flesh that lays down "the law of our resurrection" (*legem nostrae resurrectioni*),¹⁴⁰ such that resurrection, like divine incarnation, is but a vindication and authentication of God's original purpose in creating material flesh. Still, Tertullian does not scrutinize the peculiar graces communicated through Christ's own resurrected body; nor does Pseudo-Athenagoras in his *On the Resurrection*, a text that considers both the power of God to resurrect bodies and the teleological function of resurrection in fulfilling the Creator's providential plan for human creatures.¹⁴¹

These kinds of emphases on the exemplarity of Christ's resurrection, its proof of the divine power to raise the dead, its fulfillment of prophecy, and its importance as a capstone to his incarnate ministry remained fully intact in the fourth and fifth centuries. But also enduring was the propensity to identify the death of Jesus as the decisive show of divine freedom in the face of the stark necessity of creaturely death,¹⁴² and as the death of death itself and thus the true and victorious breakthrough to the new creation.¹⁴³ "A few drops of blood refashion the whole cosmos" (ῥανίδες αἵματος ὀλίγαι κόσμον ὅλον ἀναπλάττουσαι), in the classic understatement of Gregory Nazianzen.¹⁴⁴ Christ's death, even more basically than his resurrection, continued to ground the hope of creaturely deification, though patristic commentators certainly did not intend to pit the significance of the cross against that of the resurrection. Following the early example of Irenaeus, the urge was still to hold together incarnation, suffering, death, descent into hell, resurrection, and ascension in the recapitulative "itinerary" of Christ in which the faithful share by grace.¹⁴⁵ If the passion was the terminus of the Creator's kenotic *descensus*, wherefore the faithful were expected to descend with him (baptismally, ascetically,

¹³⁸ *De resurrectione* 1.9; 9.1–9, ed. Martin Heimgartner, *Pseudojustin: Über die Auferstehung*, PTS 54 (Walter de Gruyter, 2001), 104, 124–6.

¹³⁹ *De res. carnis* 2 (Evans, 6, 7).

¹⁴⁰ *De carne Christi* 1 (Evans, 4).

¹⁴¹ *De resurrectione* 2.1–25.5 (Schoedel, 90–148).

¹⁴² cf. Gregory of Nyssa, *Or. 3. in sanctum Pascha* (GNO 9:248); Ambrose, *Expos. in Lucam* 10.125–7 (CSEL 32.4:502–3); Ephrem, *Serm. de Domino nostro* 3 (CSCO 270:3–4).

¹⁴³ See e.g. Athanasius, *Or. c. Arianos* 1.43 (PG 26:100C): "Our resurrection is stored up (ἀπόκειται) in the cross"; Ambrose, *De excessu fratris sui Satyri* 2.46 (CSEL 73:273).

¹⁴⁴ Gregory Nazianzen, *Or. 45.29* (PG 36:664A).

¹⁴⁵ See e.g. Athanasius, *Or. c. Arianos* 1.44–45 (PG 26:101C–105B); John Cassian, *De incarnatione* 6.17 (CSEL 17:344).

sacrificially), the resurrection, in turn, was the launching of his *ascensus* and exaltation, in which believers could also participate in the newness of sanctified life.¹⁴⁶ Sheol, as Ephrem so often stresses, was a “womb” perfectly paralleling the womb of Mary and the womb of the sepulcher.¹⁴⁷ Rising out of it, says Narsai, he “brought up with him a catch of men to a new life.”¹⁴⁸

In the fourth and fifth centuries, new interests in the unique recreative power of Christ’s own resurrection and in the nature of his resurrected body as a sign of the new creation were actually driven less by the renewed debate over the constitution of resurrected bodies¹⁴⁹ than by the strongly incarnational soteriology that I have already been highlighting. A deeper mystery had to underlie a body that could pass through doors while also being visible and even tangible (John 20:19–28), a body presumably incorruptible but retaining the signs of physical wounding and corruption on its way to ascension and enthronement. Jesus himself pointed to that mystery by forbidding Mary Magdalene to touch his risen body while inviting Thomas to do just that (John 20:17, 27).¹⁵⁰ Not only was he indicating something profound about his mysterious “bodily” presence in the world, he was deliberately pushing out the boundaries of created bodies and inaugurating the eschatological remaking of corporeality itself. As Ambrose asserts, Christ raised his own corpse, scars and all, “to assure [his disciples] by all means of the resurrection of our nature through its renewal in him.”¹⁵¹ He transformed a corpse into an unprecedented body; and that corpse, says Hilary, did not simply disperse or disappear and

¹⁴⁶ Gregory Nazianzen, *Or.* 45.24–25 (PG 36:656C–657C); Gregory of Nyssa, *Or. in ascensionem Christi* (GNO 9:325); Augustine, *Enchiridion* 14.53 (CCSL 46:78); Maximus the Confessor, *Cap. theol.* 2.23–24; 2.27 (PG 90:1136A–B, 1137A–B).

¹⁴⁷ *Hymnus de nativitate* 10.7 (CSCO 186:68); cf. *Carmina Nisibena* 38.7 (CSCO 240:21). And on Sheol as a womb in Ephrem, see Buchan, “Blessed Is He Who Has Brought Adam from Sheol,” 99–106.

¹⁴⁸ *Hom. de resurrectione*, ll. 281–2 (PO 40.1:154, 155). Earlier, cf. Cyril of Jerusalem, *Cat.* 14.18 (PG 33:848C), describing Christ as the one who “descended into hell, but ascended one of many; for he went down into death, and ‘many of the bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised’ (Matt. 27:52) through him.”

¹⁴⁹ A debate that reached fevered pitch in the fourth-century responses of Methodius, Epiphanius, and Jerome to the controversial views of Origen and his disciples, as well as in Pamphilus’ fierce defense of Origen’s views in his *Apologia Origenis*.

¹⁵⁰ Cyril of Alexandria understands this dialectic of the unavailability and availability of Christ’s risen body as a signal of (1) the character of his presence to the apostles, and by extension to the whole church, before and after the bestowal of the Holy Spirit (John 16:7; 20:22–3); and (2) the simultaneously invisible and visible (tangible) presence of Christ in the Eucharist (*Comm. in Johannem* 12, PG 74:692D–696D). Ambrose and Augustine both emphasize that the risen Christ fully commanded the salvific function of his resurrected and imminently ascending body. He forbade Mary Magdalene from touching it outside the empty tomb not because she was a woman, but because through this body he was leading her—and all his disciples—up to a higher comprehension of the mystery of his incarnation and resurrection. See Ambrose, *Expos. in Lucam* 10.153–65 (CSEL 32.4:513–15, 517–19); Augustine, *Tract. in Johannem* 121.3 (CCSL 36:665–6).

¹⁵¹ *De fide* (frag.) (PL 16:849), trans. Edwards, *We Believe in the Crucified and Risen Lord*, 143.

the new body appear *ex nihilo*. It was a transmutation utterly and purposefully inexplicable, reinforcing the “foolishness” of God incarnate (1 Cor. 1:18–31) that overcomes pretentious human wisdom.¹⁵²

Three notable attempts to convey more explicitly the *ontological* relation between Christ’s resurrected body and others’ appear respectively in Gregory of Nyssa, Theodore of Mopsuestia, and Augustine. Gregory, in his sermon *On the Three-Day Period of the Resurrection of Our Lord Jesus Christ* as well as in his *Paschal Sermons*, frames Christ’s resurrection in terms of the fullness of the Paschal “day,” “the day that the Lord has made” (Ps. 117(118):24), a day different from the original days of creation because it was “the beginning of a new creation” and the making of a “new heaven and new earth” (2 Peter 3:13; Rev. 21:1) and concomitantly the destruction of evil.¹⁵³ That new creation, he makes clear, is no eschatologically deferred change in bodily existence. It is a transformation from *within* the creature—an “elemental change in our very nature” (αὐτῆς τῆς φύσεως ἡμῶν μεταστοιχείωσις)—that begins in baptism and finds continuing external expression in the moral, spiritual, and ecclesial life of creatures and in the consummation of their rebirth at the resurrection.¹⁵⁴ Explaining how the resurrection spanned “three days and three nights” (Matt. 12:40) gives occasion for Gregory to argue that the Paschal mystery, overriding time and space, is syncopated rather according to the initiatives of the Savior to lay down his life, which actually began on Thursday night’s Last Supper, before taking it up again on Easter morning.¹⁵⁵ But this “threesome” also hints, on a higher level, at the ontologically simultaneous moments of Christ’s action and presence: his laying down of his soul into hell, “the heart of the earth” (John 10:17–18; Matt. 12:40); his passage with the thief into Paradise (Luke 23:43); and his committal of his spirit into the “hands” of the Father (Luke 23:46).¹⁵⁶ More apropos of the resurrection itself, Gregory adds the view that just as in his incarnation Christ assumed soul and body so as to save creatures from death, and redemptively unleashed soul from body (while remaining present in both) at the moment he died, he perfectly re-bonded soul and body in his resurrection, enabling the redeemed to come into that “Paradise” which is at once their rest in the “hands” of the Father.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵² Hilary, *De Trinitate* 3.20–26 (SC 443:370–86).

¹⁵³ cf. *De tridui spatio* (GNO 9:278–90); *Or. 1 in sanctum Pascha* (PG 46:605A–B); *ibid.* 3 (GNO 9:249); *ibid.* 4 (PG 46:682C–683A).

¹⁵⁴ *De tridui spatio* (GNO 9:278–80). The interiority of this transformation is analyzed in detail by Monique Alexandre, “Pâques, la vie nouvelle,” in Andreas Spira and Christoph Klock, eds., *The Easter Sermons of Gregory of Nyssa: Translation and Commentary* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Patristic Foundation, 1981), 153–94.

¹⁵⁵ *De tridui spatio* (GNO 9:286–90).

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.* (GNO 9:290–4).

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.* (GNO 9:291–4). On the resurrection as the recovery of the perfect fusion of soul and body, as in their original relation when they were co-created, see *De anima et res.* (PG 46:125C, 145D–160C); *De hom. opif.* 26–9 (PG 44:224B–240B). See also Brian Daley, “The Human Form

Gregory also, as noted briefly in the last chapter, sets out a detailed profile of Christ as the New Adam, the “firstborn of creation” and the “firstborn of the dead” whose three “births” (virgin birth, baptism, and resurrection) ushered in a new creation:

But since it was also necessary that he should implant in our nature the power of rising again from the dead, he becomes the “first-fruits of those who have fallen asleep” (1 Cor. 15:20) and the “firstborn from the dead” (Col. 1:18), in that he first by his own act loosed the pains of death (cf. Acts 2:24), so that his new birth from the dead was made a way for us also, since the pains of death, wherein we were held, were loosed by the resurrection of the Lord. Thus, just as by having shared in the washing of regeneration (cf. Titus 3:5), he became “the firstborn among many brethren” (Rom. 8:29) and again by having made himself the first-fruits of the resurrection, he obtains the name of the “firstborn from the dead”, so having in all things the preeminence, after that “all old things”, as the apostle says, “have passed away” (2 Cor. 5:17), he becomes the Firstborn of the new creation of humanity in Christ by the two-fold regeneration, alike that by holy baptism and that which is the consequence of the resurrection from the dead, becoming for us in both alike the Author of life (Acts 3:15), the First-fruits, the Firstborn.¹⁵⁸

Theodore of Mopsuestia, recurring once again to the Irenaean principle of recapitulation, also employs the Adam-Christ typology to elicit the ontological solidarity of Christ’s resurrected body with the bodies of his beneficiaries. In his exegesis of key passages in Ephesians and Colossians he describes how the New Adam’s resurrected body represents the ultimate harmonization of soul and body in human nature, all the more crucially so because that nature constitutes the intersection and bond between spiritual and material creation *as a whole*. With human sin and mortality having ruptured the universe, the interconnection of all creation was dissolved and the invisible creation was alienated from the visible. Perfectly reuniting an incorruptible body and an immortal soul, the resurrected Lord thereby heals the division within all creation, of which he is the fullness (πλήρωμα).¹⁵⁹ Creation, church, and the resurrected humanity of Christ are galvanized as one eschatological body, since that fullness of Christ is communicated ecclesially (so too sacramentally) and cosmically.¹⁶⁰

Divine’: Christ’s Risen Body and Ours according to Gregory of Nyssa,” in Frances Young et al., eds., *Studia Patristica* 41 (Leuven: Peeters, 2006), 301–18.

¹⁵⁸ C. Eun. 2.81 (*Refutatio confessionis Eunomii*) (GNO 2:345–6); trans. NPNF² 5:112–13 (slightly altered).

¹⁵⁹ *Comm. in Eph.* 1.10; 1.23; 4.16 (Swete, 128–30, 140–2, 170–1); *Comm. in Col.* 1.15; 1.16; 1.19; 2.9 (Swete, 261–4, 269, 275–6, 286). On these rich themes of recapitulation, restoration, and resurrection in Theodore, see Frederick McLeod, *The Role of Christ’s Humanity in Salvation: Insights from Theodore of Mopsuestia* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2005), 102–23.

¹⁶⁰ *Comm. in Col.* 1.19 (Swete, 275–6).

Augustine's interpretation of the significance of Christ's resurrected body, and its ontological relation to the bodies of resurrected believers, bears resemblances to Gregory and Theodore alike. As the New Adam, Christ's bodily resurrection reverses the "double death" of humanity—the death of the soul in sin and the death of the body through corruption—and carries both "realized" and future aspects. The risen Christ heals the inner human by an ongoing "mystery" of transformation and the outer human (2 Cor. 4:16) by serving as a "type" of the future bodily resurrection.¹⁶¹ But Augustine also sets in even bolder relief the ecclesial dimension, the risen Christ's eschatological solidarity with the church. As "firstborn of the dead" (Col. 1:18) and "first fruits of the resurrection" (1 Cor. 15:20), Christ raises the *totus Christus*, that is, his own body along with the body of the church of which he is the intrinsic Head, after together running the gauntlet of earthly suffering. Indeed it is the *totus Christus* speaking in Psalm 3:6, "I slept, and took rest; and I rose, for the Lord will raise me up":

Where the Head goes first, the other limbs will follow, for who will separate us from the love of Christ (Rom. 8:35)? The Church, therefore, is right to say, "You are my support, my glory" (Ps. 3:3), for it does not attribute its pre-eminence to itself, since it understands by whose grace and mercy it is what it is. "And you lift up my head". This, of course, refers to the one who is the firstborn from the dead (Col. 1:18) and who ascended into heaven . . . Let God's people also say this: "I have slept and taken rest, and I arose because the Lord will raise me" (Ps. 3:6); let them pray so, that they may be joined and connected to their Head.¹⁶²

Augustine furthermore claims that the simple historical fact of Christ's resurrection from the dead is not the real basis for his being "predestined Son of God" (Rom. 1:4): "For his own resurrection does not show how he is the Son of God, and by this special and most outstanding worthiness the Head of the church, since others will be raised from the dead." Rather, he was *predestinatus filius Dei* specifically with a view to his primacy and power as "firstborn from the dead," the one who pioneers and ordains the eschatological resurrection of the church.¹⁶³

While much of the patristic interest in the resurrection of Christ concentrated on the "new creation" coming to realization within humanity and the church, we also find, especially in homiletical and liturgical texts from the increasingly elaborate Paschal celebration extending back to the second century, an emphasis on the participation of *all* creation. Some commentators drew connections between Pascha and the springtide renewal of nature,

¹⁶¹ *De Trinitate* 4.3.5–6 (CCSL 50:165–9).

¹⁶² *Enarr. in Ps.* 3.9 (CCSL 38:12), trans. Maria Boulding, WSA 3.15:82 (slightly modified).

¹⁶³ *Epistola ad Romanos inchoata expositio* 5.1–17 (Fredriksen Landes, 56–60).

projecting spring as nature's symbol for Christ's resurrection.¹⁶⁴ Eusebius of Caesarea, determining that the Resurrection appropriately fell in that month, considered the anniversary of creation itself (adapting a Jewish tradition via Philo), recalls the Hexaemeron (Gen. 1) as a "paschal" event:

This season was the very one celebrated at the original creation (*κοσμογονίας*) of the universe, whereupon the earth sprouted plants, whereupon the luminaries came into being, whereupon heaven and earth arose and all that is in them. At this point as well, the Savior of the whole world fulfilled the mystery of his own festival, and the great Illuminator enlightened the earth with the rays of piety; and so this season appears to comprise the very birthday of the cosmos (*γενέθλιον κοσμοῦ*).¹⁶⁵

Among other writers of his time, Eusebius was encouraging the cult of the risen Christ as the "Sun of Righteousness" (Mal. 4:2) who illumines all creation, displacing the deified Sol Invictus of pagan heritage who had temporarily survived in the early Constantinian regime.

Pascha as a liturgy integrating earth and heaven had roots in the second-century Quartodeciman tradition in Asia Minor, and resonates in later Christian liturgists and preachers, such as in this *Exultet* variously ascribed to Ambrose and Augustine:

Common feast of the world:
Proclamation to the earth
of the Father's will for the universe:
divine dawning of Christ upon the earth;
invisible feast for angels and archangels,
immortal life of the entire world,
fatal wound of death,
indestructible nourishment of man,
heavenly soul of the universe,
sacred initiation of heaven and earth,
"prophet of mysteries old and new" (Matt. 13:52),
seen by eyes here on earth,
and contemplated by the spirit in the heavens . . .¹⁶⁶

I have already briefly noted Gregory of Nyssa's emphasis on the Paschal "day" (Ps. 117[118]:24) as a day of new beginnings in creation. "Today," he writes of

¹⁶⁴ cf. (Pseudo?)-Hippolytus, *Hom. pasch.* 17 (SC 27:145–9); Gregory Nazianzen, *Or.* 44.10–11 (PG 36:617C–620B); Cyril of Alexandria, *Ep. pasch.* 2.3 (SC 372:196–202); *ibid.* 9.2 (SC 392:128–32). On the development of this rich cosmic imagery of the Pascha in the early church, see Anscar Chupungco, *The Cosmic Elements of Christian Passover* (Rome: Editrice Anselmiana, 1977), 26–37; Daniélou, *The Bible and the Liturgy*, 288–302.

¹⁶⁵ Eusebius of Caesarea, *De solemnitate Paschali* 3 (PG 24:697A). In late fourth-century Italy, cf. Gaudentius of Brescia, *Hom. Pasch.* 1 (CSEL 68:18–23).

¹⁶⁶ *Exultet* (SC 27:121–3), trans. Halton and Carroll, *Liturgical Practice in the Fathers*, 79.

Easter, “the whole world (οἰκουμένην) can be seen gathered like one household (οἰκίαν) for the harmony of a single song and neglecting every ordinary business, refashioned (μετασκευασθεῖσαν) as at one signal for earnest prayer.”¹⁶⁷ Later, Proclus of Constantinople (fifth century), in a Paschal homily, summarizes the cosmic effects of Christ’s resurrection:

The blessed Paul has well said: “The former things have passed away, behold they are made new” (2 Cor. 5:17). The heavens are made new, for he who came down from them consecrated them by his ascension. The earth is made new, for it was sanctified by his human birth in the stable. The sea is made new, since it kept afloat on its surface the footsteps of him whom neither flesh conceived nor sin had rendered heavy. The earth is made new, since he freed it from war and filled it with great calm. Mankind is made new, since it was washed by him in water and molded in the fire of the Spirit. The worship of God is made new, since sacrificial fumes and circumcision have disappeared and now faith is resplendent, praising and adoring three Persons in one substance.¹⁶⁸

The Ascension of Christ and the Final Healing of Creation

In the early church East and West the bodily ascension and heavenly session of Christ came into close liturgical and doctrinal association with the resurrection as capstones of the cosmic mission of the incarnation. Early on Hippolytus insists that no “flesh” was present in heaven until the ascended Logos presented his perfected flesh as an offering to the Father (cf. John 3:13).¹⁶⁹ Later Rufinus similarly states in his *Commentary on the Apostles’ Creed*: “it pleased [Christ] to raise the mortal and corruptible body he had assumed from the rocky tomb, and rendering it immortal and incorruptible to place it, no longer in an earthly environment, but in heaven at his Father’s right hand.”¹⁷⁰ Typically, the ascended Christ was understood to be glorified as heir of creation by the Father, but especially in the wake of the Arian controversy certain writers qualified this by reiterating that the Son himself already enjoyed equal glory with the Father and that only his perfected humanity (creaturehood) was the object of exaltation.¹⁷¹ Indeed, Gregory of Nyssa

¹⁶⁷ *Or. 3 in sanctum Pascha* (GNO 9:249), trans. Stuart Hall in Spira and Klock, *The Easter Sermons of Gregory of Nyssa*, 7–8.

¹⁶⁸ *Or. 13 in sanctum Pascha* (PG 65:792B–C), trans. Halton and Carroll, 121–2 (slightly modified).

¹⁶⁹ *Contra Noetum* 4.9–11, Latin text ed. and trans. Robert Butterworth (London: Heythrop Monographs, 1977), 53–5; cf. Ps-Justin, *De resurrectione* 9 (PTS 54:124–6); Irenaeus, *Adv. haer.* 3.19.3 (SC 211:378–80).

¹⁷⁰ *Comm. in Symbolum Apostolorum* 29 (PL 21:365B–C), trans. Kelly, ACW 20:63; cf. Augustine, *De fide et symbolo* 6.13 (CSEL 41:15–16).

¹⁷¹ See Athanasius, *Or. c. Arianos* 1.41 (PG 26:96C–97C); and cf. John Chrysostom, *Hom. in Acta Apost.* 2.3 (PG 60:29), emphasizing the difference within Scripture between Christ, by his

perceives a sublime irony in the fact that the heavenly powers did not even recognize him at his return ("Who is this King of Glory"? Ps. 23[24]:8) because he was "wrapped in the sordid tunic of our life, his garments stained red from the winepress of human vices."¹⁷²

Patristic interpreters also made much of the fact that, when he ascended, Christ's destination was not simply the highest of cosmic heavens, whose "gates" were commanded to be opened to him (Ps. 23[24]:7) in the Ascension festal liturgy,¹⁷³ but the realm above and beyond the heavens (Eph. 4:10).¹⁷⁴ It was in the immediate and intimate presence of the Father that Christ enthroned his recreated, eschatological humanity. Humanity was clearly the primary beneficiary, as a number of commentators attest:

Truly it was a great and indescribable source of rejoicing when, in the sight of the heavenly multitudes, the nature of our human race ascended over the dignity of all heavenly creatures, to pass the angelic orders and to be raised beyond the heights of archangels. In its ascension it did not stop at any other height until this same nature was received at the seat of the eternal Father, to be associated on the throne of glory of that One to whose nature it was joined in the Son.¹⁷⁵

This conviction had important resonances in patristic theological anthropology and soteriology (e.g. the doctrine of deification), but as Irenaeus proposes very early in invoking the Rule of Faith, it had significant cosmological implications as well. The "ascension into heaven in the flesh" (*in carne in caelos*

divine power, actively "ascending" into heaven (Acts 1:11), and his human *flesh* being passively "assumed" or taken up (Luke 24:51; Acts 1:9).

¹⁷² *Or. in ascensionem Christi* (GNO 9:326).

¹⁷³ For early uses of Ps. 23(24), an enthronement psalm, in conjunction with the Ascension, see Justin, *1 Apol.* 51 (Minns and Parvis, 208–10); Irenaeus, *Epideixis* 84 (PO 12.5:719–20); later Athanasius, *Or. c. Arianos* 1.41 (PG 26:97B); Cyril of Jerusalem, *Cat.* 10.19; 14.24 (PG 33:688A–B; 858A); Gregory Nazianzen, *Or.* 45.25 (PG 36:657B–C); Gregory of Nyssa, *Or. in ascensionem Christi* (GNO 9:325–6); Chromatius of Aquileia, *Serm.* 8.3 (SC 154:190); Theodoret, *Comm. in Ps.* 23(24) (PG 80:1033A–B); Romanos the Melodist, *Kontakion* 32.10 (*de ascensione*) (Maas and Trypanis, 255); Narsai, *Hom. 5 in ascensionem*, ll. 75–84 (PO 40.1:166). On the early development of the Ascension liturgy, see Daniélou, *The Bible and the Liturgy*, 303–18.

¹⁷⁴ Though difficult to date, the composite work of the *Ascension of Isaiah* already has the prophet Isaiah envisioning himself ascending to the "seventh heaven" only to find Christ already enthroned there and granting access since he himself, as incarnate, was destined to make his way through the hierarchy of heavens. See also Jerome, *Comm. in Eph.* 2.4.10 (PG 26:499B); Marius Victorinus, *Comm. in Eph.* 2.4.11 (Locher, 179).

¹⁷⁵ Leo the Great, *Serm.* 73.4 (SC 74^{bis}:272–4), trans. Freeland and Conway, FOTC 93:324; cf. Chromatius of Aquileia, *Serm.* 8.2, 4 (SC 154:184–8, 192–4); cf. Augustine, *Serm.* 242.6 (PL 38:1140–1). In the Syriac tradition, cf. Narsai, *Hom. 5 in ascensionem*, ll. 85–6 (PO 40.1:166–7): "Hail to our nature which has been exalted in name and in reality and has ascended and begun to reign over rulers and authorities!" On this motif in patristic preaching, see Hendrik Stander, "Fourth- and Fifth-Century Homilists on the Ascension of Christ," in Abraham Malherbe et al., *The Early Church in Its Context: Essays in Honor of Everett Ferguson* (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 268–86, esp. 276–7.

ascensio) completed Christ's recapitulation of *all things*.¹⁷⁶ For it finally prepared the way for that future consummation in which, the perfected human creature having been elevated in Christ, the whole of creation will be liberated from bondage and the "new heaven and new earth" commenced.¹⁷⁷ At that point, Irenaeus indicates, the resources of creation will be fully unleashed. The fecundity and "increase" such as creation knew before the fall will be recovered and utterly unimpeded,¹⁷⁸ since Christ, ascending into heaven as the "first fruits of the resurrection" (1 Cor. 1:20), will apply the "increase of God" to the whole "body" of redeemed humanity and, by extension, the whole creation.¹⁷⁹ Theodore of Mopsuestia, whom we have found to be an important later exponent of Irenaeian recapitulation theory, puts his unique christological stamp on this same idea, emphasizing the "renewing" grace operative in the ascending Christ's own perfect humanity, which has ultimately benefited all of creation:

He is the firstborn of all the creatures (Col. 1:15) because all the creation was renewed and changed through the renewal which he granted to it by his grace from the renewal into which he himself was renewed, and through which he moved to a new life *and ascended high above all creatures*. He is rightly called the first-born of all the creatures, because he was first renewed, and then he renewed the creatures, while he is higher in honour than all of them.¹⁸⁰

Varying perspectives on the bodily ascension of Christ as a universal, cosmic, eschatological—or in Augustine's case, ecclesial¹⁸¹—event appear in patristic interpreters. Some imagined all creation being drawn toward perfect reconciliation and unity as the Savior forged an ultimate bridge between earth and heaven. Various writers even envisioned Christ being actually or proleptically "accompanied" into heaven by his renovated creatures (including angels)

¹⁷⁶ *Adv. haer.* 1.10.1 (SC 264:156); cf. *ibid.* 5.36.3 (SC 153:466). On the foundational significance of Irenaeus' teaching on the ascension, see Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia*, 44–85.

¹⁷⁷ *Adv. haer.* 5.36.1–3 (SC 153:452–66).

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.* 2.28.1 (SC 294:268–70); 4.11.1 (SC 100:498); 5.32.1 (SC 153:396–8); also Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia*, 49, 50, 52, 62.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.* 3.19.3 (SC 211:378–82).

¹⁸⁰ *Homilia catechetica* 3 (in *Symbolum Nicenum*), trans. (from the Syriac recension) Alphonse Mingana, Woodbrooke Studies 5 (Cambridge: Heffer & Sons, 1932), 39 (slightly modified; emphasis added); also *ibid.* 7 (Mingana, 76–7). The idea that Christ's humanity itself underwent "renewal" for the sake of creation fits Theodore's model of the progressive indwelling of the Logos in Jesus, who, though never morally deficient, revealed the Father's "excelling grace" and "approval" (*εὐδοκία*) in the incarnate Son.

¹⁸¹ Augustine in his doctrine of the ascension resumes the principle of the *totus Christus*: Christ, in ascending, brings with him into the presence of the Father the body of the true church drawn from all the Gentiles of the earth. See his *Sermones* 262–5; also Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia*, 117–29.

emerging to extol him and share in the miraculous moment.¹⁸² “Earthly and heavenly beings,” says Narsai, “gathered to accompany him as he was setting out to go (and) receive the Kingdom on high . . . Rational and dumb beings united their voices under the chariot and continually celebrated the hidden One in the visible one, the Self-Existent in the body.”¹⁸³ Isaac of Nineveh sees Christ ascending “to that place that no created being had trod, but wither he had, through his own (action), invited all rational beings, angels and human beings,” so that they might delight in the luminous splendor of his glorified humanity.¹⁸⁴

Maximus the Confessor, expressly recalling the principle of cosmic recapitulation in Ephesians 1:10, paints a detailed portrait of the universal effects of the ascension of Christ, framed against the background of the whole of his incarnate ministry on behalf of creation. In the strongly neo-Irenaeian text of *Ambiguum* 41, Maximus describes a descending pattern of cosmic “polarities” mediated in an ascending pattern through the actions of Jesus Christ.¹⁸⁵ Figure 4 indicates the symmetry of this significant construction in Maximus’ christocentric cosmology.

In Maximus’ scheme, the first three divisions are “natural” to creation, while the last two pertain only to creation in its fallen state. Through the course of his ministry to creation, Christ seamlessly mediated both the natural and the unnatural polarities. In the mystery of his virgin birth and incarnation proper, he healed the divide between male and female. By rising from the dead and entering Paradise with the thief whom he encountered on the cross (cf. Luke 23:42–43), he bridged Paradise with the “inhabited earth” (οἰκουμένη), the domain into which fallen creatures were cast after Adam and Eve’s disobedience.¹⁸⁶ This healing of the fractures in creation culminated in his phased bodily ascension, whereby he once for all perfectly united creation to the Creator:

Then, when he ascended into heaven, he manifestly united heaven and earth, and with his earthly body, of the same nature and substance as ours, he advanced into heaven and displayed how, according to its more universal *logos*, our entire sensible nature is one, thereby obscuring the peculiarity of the division that internally dissects it. He furthermore united sensible and intelligible creation by passing with his soul and body—that is, with our whole human nature—successively through all the ranks of divine and intelligible beings in heaven; and in so doing he demonstrated the convergence of the whole creation with the One

¹⁸² cf. Ps-Athanasius, *Sermo in assumpt. Dom.* 5 (PG 28:1100C); Proclus of Constantinople, *Sermo de ascensione Domini* 3 (PG 65:836C–D); Chromatius of Aquileia, *Serm.* 8.4 (SC 154:190–2).

¹⁸³ *Hom. 5 in ascensionem*, ll. 65, 71–2 (PO 40.1:166), trans. McLeod, *ibid.*, 167.

¹⁸⁴ *The Second Part* 11.29 (CSCO 554:51), trans. Brock, CSCO 555:61.

¹⁸⁵ *Amb.* 41 (PG 91:1309A–1312B); also *Qu. Thal.* 48 (CCSG 7:333–5); *Expos. orat. dom.* (CCSG 23:33).

¹⁸⁶ *Amb.* 41 (PG 91:1309B).

(Creator) in accordance with its most original and universal *logos*, which is in itself utterly indivisible and stable. Last of all, seen in his [full] humanity, he comes before God himself, manifestly appearing for our sake, as Scripture attests (Heb. 9:24), in the presence of our God and Father as a human being.¹⁸⁷

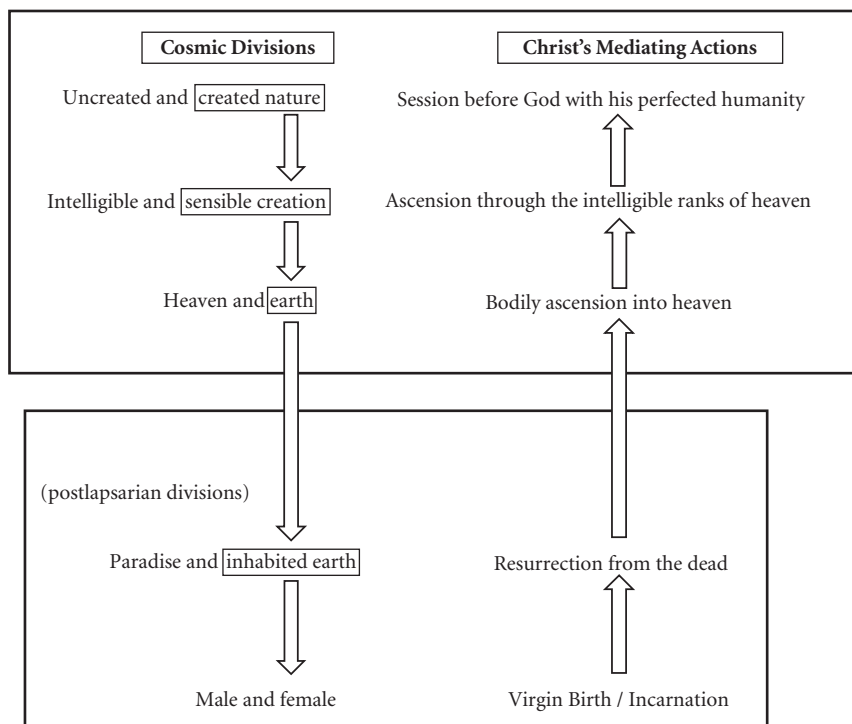


Figure 4

Christ's bodily ascent to enthronement at the right hand of the Father effectively constituted a culminating fusion of the natural structures of the universe with the supernatural divine work of saving, elevating, and deifying creation out of its fallen state. Christ vindicated the purposive natural differences within creation and, according to his good purposes, prevented the provisional ones (e.g. sexual distinction) from degenerating into fragmentation and alienation.¹⁸⁸ In his characteristic emphasis on humanity as a microcosm of the whole creation, Maximus further highlights the human participation in this work of mediation and recapitulation. It is "with us and through us" (*σὺν ἡμῖν καὶ δι' ἡμᾶς*)—that is, through the various disciplines of the spiritual and ascetical life—that the incarnate, risen, and ascended Lord is

¹⁸⁷ Ibid. (PG 91:1309C–D).

¹⁸⁸ On this pivotal theme in *Amb. 41*, see Thunberg, *Microcosm and Mediator*, 373–427; Tollefsen, *The Christocentric Cosmology of St Maximus the Confessor*, 82ff.

still mending the essential and accidental extremities of creation, ultimately revealing that the macrocosm of the universe is like a human being whose constitutive parts are all perfectly integrated according to a single comprehensive *logos* that gives definition to everything created *ex nihilo*.¹⁸⁹

This brief examination of some key patristic interpretations of the ascension of Christ should suffice to show that the event was understood not only as a continuing disclosure of the mystery of resurrection and of the remaking of corporeality but as a key episode in its own right in the drama of the divine economy. Christ has deified and glorified human nature and finally presented it to the Father as a sign of the reconciliation and elevation of all creation. Creation's "access" to the throne room of the Creator has moved to a whole new level. Indeed, *sub specie aeternitatis*, the ascension has spectacularly brought together the protological, historical, and eschatological aspects of Christ's work of cosmic recapitulation.

II. THE CREATIVE AND PERFECTIVE ROLE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

Establishing the Trinitarian Dignity of the Holy Spirit as Creator

The distinctive work of the Holy Spirit in the divine economy found expression very early in pre-Nicene Christian authors, often in conjunction with the inspiration of Scripture, baptism, and growth in Christian maturity, but also in the overall ordering and perfecting of creation. And yet the dynamism in these authors' descriptions of the operations of the Spirit and the perceived deficiencies in their language of the intra-trinitarian relations have consistently met with criticism from historical theologians who hold them up, anachronistically, to Niceno-Constantinopolitan trinitarian standards. One critic, for example, insists that Origen's theological system remains intrinsically binitarian,¹⁹⁰ while another more recently opines that "in Origen's worldview the Spirit is not so much the creator Spirit as simply the Spirit of wisdom and holiness,"¹⁹¹ as if Origen's Holy Spirit were little more than a kind of supplementary grace for religious knowledge and life. Still another critic says

¹⁸⁹ *Amb.* 41 (PG 91:1312A–B). For how this mediation of creation registers in the ascetical or spiritual development of Christians, see *ibid.* (1305C–1308C); also Thunberg, *Microcosm and Mediator*, 373–432.

¹⁹⁰ Wolf-Dieter Hauschild, *Gottes Geist und Mensch: Studien zur frühchristlichen Pneumatologie* (Munich: Kaiser-Verlag, 1972), 149. To his credit, Hauschild strongly emphasizes the soteriological role of Origen's pneumatology.

¹⁹¹ Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia*, 102.

that Origen's Spirit is abstractly the "mediation" but not the "mediator" between God and creatures.¹⁹² These criticisms are hard fully to sustain since Origen expressly refers to the Spirit as an hypostasis alongside the Father and the Son,¹⁹³ and defends the Spirit's hypostatic identity from critics who referred to the Spirit purely as an "activity" (ἐνέργεια) of God.¹⁹⁴

To be sure, there are significant interpretive hurdles if the a priori theological assumption is that a *created* Spirit could never authentically have aided in the divine work of creating and sustaining the world. Desiring to elevate the Holy Spirit above creatures, Origen identifies the Spirit as the preeminent "creature" of the Father "through the Logos,"¹⁹⁵ and, while elsewhere he calls the Spirit "uncreated" on a par with the Father and the Son, it is likely by the corrective pen of his Latin translator Rufinus.¹⁹⁶ In the earlier, apocalyptic text of the *Ascension of Isaiah* (early second century), the Holy Spirit is regularly designated an exalted "angel" and, though worthy of worship, is placed in a patently subordinate position to Christ as well as to the Father.¹⁹⁷ Ultimately, however, we must look past the relative subordinationism in pre-Nicene treatments of the Spirit if we are to engage the positive contributions of second- and third-century theologians to the exegesis of the Bible's complex and richly evocative language of the workings of the Holy Spirit, including the Spirit's activity in creation.¹⁹⁸

I would recall the detailed discussion in chapter five of early patristic exegesis of Genesis 1:2 to make my point.¹⁹⁹ There I noted a number of

¹⁹² Killian McDonnell, *The Other Hand of God: The Holy Spirit as the Universal Touch and Goal* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2003), 104–5.

¹⁹³ *Comm. in Johannem* 2.10.75 (GCS 10:65).

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.* frag. 37 on John 3:8 (GCS 10:513–14). On this important fragment and the legacy of its interpretation, see Andrew Radde-Gallwitz, "The Holy Spirit as Agent, not Activity: Origen's Argument with Modalism and Its Afterlife in Didymus, Eunomius, and Gregory of Nazianzus," *Vigiliae Christianae* 65 (2011): 227–48.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.* 2.10.73–86 (GCS 10:64–7); cf. later Eusebius of Caesarea, *Praeparatio Evangelica* 11.20.1 (SC 292:150). For a survey of the interpretive difficulties in Origen, see Hauschild, *Gottes Geist und Mensch*, 135–50, esp. 141ff; also Michael Haykin, *The Spirit of God: The Exegesis of 1 and 2 Corinthians in the Pneumatomachian Controversy of the Fourth Century* (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 9–18, which includes extensive bibliography on the *status quaestionis* of Origen's doctrine of the Holy Spirit.

¹⁹⁶ See (in Rufinus's translation) *De princ.* 1.3.3; 2.7.1 (SC 252:146–8, 326–8); *Comm. in Rom.* 1:24–25 (Hammond Bammel, 1:91, ll. 105–7): *Nos autem qui nullam creaturam sed patrem et filium e Spiritum Sanctum colimus et adoramus sicut non erramus in cultu . . .*

¹⁹⁷ See *Ascensio Isaiae* 3.16 [Gk] (CCSA 7:143); 7.23 [Eth; Lat; Bulg] (CCSA 7:87, 219, 294); 8.18 [Eth; Bulg] (CCSA 7:94, 301); 9.36, 39–40 [Eth; Lat; Bulg] (CCSA 7:109, 227, 309); 10.4 [Eth] (CCSA 7:111); 11.4, 33 [Eth; Bulg] (CCSA 7:119, 127, 316). See also Loren Stuckenbruck, "The Holy Spirit in the *Ascension of Isaiah*," in Graham Stanton et al., eds., *The Holy Spirit and Christian Origins: Essays in Honor of James D.G. Dunn* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 308–20.

¹⁹⁸ For a model of judiciously interpreting pre-Nicene conceptions of the Holy Spirit, see Graham Stanton, "The Spirit in the Writings of Justin Martyr," in Stanton et al., *The Holy Spirit and Christian Origins*, 321–34.

¹⁹⁹ See above, chap. 5, 113–18.

pre-Nicene commentators—among them Theophilus of Antioch, Tertullian, Pseudo-Hippolytus, and Origen—who were already at work interpreting the “hovering” spirit (*ruach*; *πνεῦμα*) at creation and attempting to determine whether that spirit was an animating wind or the Holy Spirit. In fact the basic division of approaches to this question was in place well before the fourth century, and post-Nicene theologians continued to rehearse issues regarding the theological purview of Genesis 1:2 that had been mapped out by their pre-Nicene forbears. Interpreting this single verse of Scripture carried tremendously high stakes for establishing the cooperation of the whole Trinity in creation, and in the long run patristic consensus tilted toward identifying the spirit in this text as the Holy Spirit, nurturer of creation.

In retrospect, however, it took the extended post-Nicene controversy over the Spirit’s divinity to earn the Holy Spirit a full share in the trinitarian title of Creator, for this debate quickly brought to a head the issue of whether the Holy Spirit was creature or Creator. Athanasius, in his letters to the bishop Serapion of Thmuis (ca. 358/9), castigated those “Tropici” in Egypt (who bear resemblances to the broader group elsewhere known as *Pneumatomachi*) for appearing superficially orthodox on the Father-Son relation but then reapplying the Arian heresy to the Holy Spirit since, by dubbing the Spirit a creature and thus blaspheming the Spirit (Matt. 12:31), they undermined the Son and the whole integrity of the Trinity.²⁰⁰ To Athanasius’ voice Didymus the Blind, the Cappadocian Fathers, Ambrose, Augustine, Leo the Great and others added their own strong rebuke of the *Pneumatomachi*. Didymus, in his extensive treatise *On the Holy Spirit*, reiterates many of Athanasius’ arguments, though his work is much less explicitly polemical.²⁰¹ Writing in 373, eight years before the Council of Constantinople, Basil of Caesarea anticipates the creedal statement on the Spirit associated with that Council, speaking of the shared “glory” (*δόξα*) of the Spirit as Creator along with the Father and the Son, though stopping short of explicitly calling the Spirit consubstantial (*ὁμοούσιον*) with them:

[We glorify] the Holy Spirit with the Father and the Son in the conviction that the Spirit is not separated from the divine nature. For, that which is different according to its nature would not share the same honors. And we pity those who say that the Holy Spirit is a creature on the grounds that by such a statement they have fallen into the unpardonable sin of blasphemy against him (Matt. 12:31). Now, the fact that a creature is distinct from the Divinity needs no further explanation to those who are even a little familiar with the Scriptures. For, creation is slave, but the Spirit sets free (Rom. 8:2); creation is in need of life, while “it is the Spirit that gives life” (John 6:65); creation also needs teaching, the Spirit is the Teacher (cf. John 14:26); creation is sanctified, the Spirit is the

²⁰⁰ *Ep. ad Serapionem* 1.2–3 (PG 26:532B–536C).

²⁰¹ Louis Doutreleau summarizes these in his edition of the work in SC 386:33–6.

Sanctifier (cf. Rom. 15:16). Even if you would mean angels, or archangels, or all the heavenly powers, it is through the Spirit that they receive their holiness.²⁰² For, the Spirit of himself has a natural sanctity not received through grace but joined essentially to him, whence also he has gained in a special manner the name of “Holy”.²⁰³

Like Basil already,²⁰⁴ Gregory of Nyssa and Ambrose, both writing treatises on the Holy Spirit around the time of the Council of Constantinople, confronted the Pneumatomachian claim that Scripture explicitly included the Father creating the world “through the Word” (John 1:3) without mention of the Spirit. All this is so much rhetorical silliness for Gregory, and he plays along. What was the Spirit doing at creation, remaining idle? Was the Spirit grudging the Father and the Son a share in the work of creation? Such absurdity collapses in the face of the inherently shared dignity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Father in essence does not need “help” since there is already a shared power (*δύναμις*) operative among the three Persons to create the universe: “the fountain of power is the Father, and the power of the Father is the Son, and the spirit of that power is the Holy Spirit; and creation entirely, in all its visible and spiritual extent, is the finished work of that divine power.”²⁰⁵ Ambrose for his part returns to the problem of John 1:3, also 1 Corinthians 8:6, not only because these texts do not mention the Spirit as an agent of creation, but some Pneumatomachi had assumed the Spirit to be among “all things” (*τὰ πάντα*) made through the Word. This prompts from the Milanese bishop a strong defense of the fact that throughout Scripture, wherever the Father and Son are portrayed to be creating or acting, the Holy Spirit is not excluded in view of their common power (*potestas*).²⁰⁶ Augustine knew

²⁰² cf. *De Spiritu Sancto* 13.29; 16.38 (PG 32:120A, 137A–B) and *Ep.* 125.3 (PG 32:549C–D), where Basil precludes any confusion of the Spirit with the ranks of angels and ministering spiritual beings.

²⁰³ *Ep.* 159.2 (PG 32:621A–B), trans. Agnes Clare Way, FOTC 13:313 (altered); see also id., *De Spiritu Sancto* 16.38 (PG 32:137A–B); *C. Eun.* 3.2 (SC 305:152–4); cf. Gregory Nazianzen, *Or.* 31.5–6 (= *Or. theol.* 5.5–6) (SC 250:282–6). Hilary, like Basil, is reticent to affirm outright the consubstantiality of the Spirit, calling him not *Deus* but *Dei*, “of God” (*De Trinitate* 2.29, SC 443:322–4). On Basil’s reticence as a sign of pastoral concern, see McDonnell, *The Other Hand of God*, 131–40.

²⁰⁴ *C. Eun.* 3.7 (SC 305:170–4).

²⁰⁵ *Adv. Macedonians* (GNO 3.1:99–100), trans. NPNF² 5:320; on the identical *ἐνέργεια* of the Spirit along with the Father and the Son, see *Ad Eustathium de sancta Trinitate* (GNO 3.1:11, 13).

²⁰⁶ *De Spiritu Sancto* 1.2.27–31; 1.3.32–54 (CSEL 79:27–30, 30–8); similarly, Nicetas of Remesiana, *De Spiritus Sancti potentia* 3–4, Latin text ed. Andrew Burn, *Niceta of Remesiana: His Life and Works* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1905), 20–3. Didymus (*De Spiritu Sancto*, SC 386:202–4), Basil (*C. Eun.* 3.7, SC 305:170–4), and Ambrose (*De Spiritu Sancto* 2.6.48–61, CSEL 79:104–10) also counter the Pneumatomachian appeal to Amos 4:13 (“Behold, I am he that establishes the thunders, and creates the wind [*spiritus*]”). See here Mark DelCogliano, “Basil of Caesarea, Didymus the Blind, and the Anti-Pneumatomachian Exegesis of Amos 4:13 and John 1:3,” *Journal of Theological Studies* N.S. 61 (2010): 644–58.

Ambrose's exegetical argumentation here, and thus considered this issue settled when, between 400 and 427, he composed his treatise *On the Trinity*.²⁰⁷

Gregory Nazianzen, in the fifth of his *Theological Orations* delivered amid the doctrinal firestorm in Constantinople in 380, shows none of Basil's or Nyssen's reserve. Like Didymus, before him,²⁰⁸ Nazianzen unabashedly avows the Holy Spirit's full divinity (*θεότης*), defined not as an abstract genus but, by the analogy of uninterrupted light, as the enjoyment of the Father's own being in an irreducible relation of derivation.²⁰⁹ The Spirit, moreover, is truly consubstantial with the Father and the Son and thus cannot be deemed a creature in any sense.²¹⁰ With the Father and the Son the Holy Spirit is Creator and has an extensive array of scriptural profiles that prove so. Eulogizing these in an extraordinary rhetorical flourish, Nazianzen applies to the Spirit the very early patristic *topos* depicting the Creator as "enclosing but not enclosed," penetrating but impenetrable:

He is called "Spirit of God" (1 Cor. 2:11), "Spirit of Christ" (Rom. 8:9), "Mind of Christ" (1 Cor. 2:14–16), "Spirit of the Lord" and "Lord" absolutely (2 Cor. 3:17); "Spirit of Adoption" (Rom. 8:15), "of Truth" (John 14:17), "of Freedom" (2 Cor. 3:17); "Spirit of Wisdom", "Understanding", "Counsel", "Might", "Knowledge", "True Religion" and of "The Fear of God" (Isa. 11:2–3). The Spirit indeed creates all these things, filling the universe with his being, sustaining the universe. His being "fills the world" (Wis. 1:7), his power is beyond the world's capacity to contain it. It is his nature, not his given function, to be good (Ps. 142[143]:10), to be righteous (Ps. 50[51]:12[10]), and to be in command (Ps. 50:14, LXX). He is the subject, not the object, of sanctifying (1 Cor. 6:11), apportioning (John 3:34), participating (Phil. 2:1), filling, sustaining (Wis. 1:7); we share in him and he shares in nothing (Wis. 1:7). He is our inheritance (Eph. 1:13–14), he is glorified (1 Cor. 16:19–20), counted together with Father and Son (1 John 5:7–8 [variant reading]; cf. Matt. 28:19); he is a dire warning to us (Mark 3:29). The "finger of God" (Luke 11:20; cf. Ex. 8:19; 31:18), he is, like God, a "fire" (Acts 2:3–4; Deut. 4:24) which proves, I think, that he is consubstantial. The Spirit it is who created (Ps. 103[104]:30) and creates anew through baptism (John 3:5; cf. 1 Cor. 12:13) and resurrection (Ezek. 37:5–14). The Spirit it is who knows all things (1 Cor. 2:10), who teaches all things (John 14:26), who blows where, and as strong as, he wills (John 3:8), who leads (Ps. 142[143]:10), speaks, sends out, separates (Acts

²⁰⁷ See *De Trinitate* 1.6.10–13; 2.8.14 (CCSL 50:39–44, 98–9).

²⁰⁸ Didymus affirms the consubstantiality of the Spirit in his *De Spiritu Sancto* 81, 231, 271 (SC 386:218–19, 352, 386). For other references and discussion, see Doutreleau's Introduction, SC 386:73–4.

²⁰⁹ Or. 31.3, 14 (= Or. theol. 5.3, 14) (SC 250:278–80, 302–4); also *Poemata Arcana* 3 (Moreschini, 14, ll. 72–93); cf. also Ambrose, *De Spiritu Sancto* 1.14.140–150 (CSEL 79:75–9), appealing to light as an analogy of the unbroken relation of the three Persons. For insightful recent analyses of Nazianzen's teaching on the Holy Spirit, see Behr, *The Nicene Faith*, 360–70; Beeley, *Gregory of Nazianzus on the Trinity and the Knowledge of God*, 153–86; McDonnell, *The Other Hand of God*, 141–7.

²¹⁰ Or. 31.10–12 (= Or. theol. 5.10–12) (SC 250:292–300); cf. also Or. 41.6–9 (*in Pentecostem*) (SC 358:326–36).

13:2–4), who is vexed (cf. Job 4:9) and tempted (Acts 5:9). He reveals (1 Cor. 2:10; cf. John 16:13), illumines (cf. John 14:26), gives life—or, rather, is absolutely Light and Life (John 6:63; Rom. 8:10). He makes us his temple (cf. 1 Cor. 3:16; 6:11), he deifies, he perfects (cf. John 16:12–13), and he initiates us in such a way that he both precedes baptism (cf. Acts 10:47) and is wanted after it (Acts 8:14–17). All that God actively performs, he performs (1 Cor. 12:4–11). Divided in fiery tongues (Acts 2:3), he distributes graces (Eph. 4:11), makes Apostles, prophets (Wis. 7:27), evangelists, pastors, and teachers (Eph. 4:4,11). He is “intelligent, manifold, clear, distinct, irresistible, unpolluted” (Wis. 7:21)—or in other words, he is utterly wise, his operations are multifarious (1 Cor. 12:11), he clarifies all things distinctly, his authority is absolute and he is free from mutability. He is “all-powerful, overseeing all and penetrating through all spirits that are intelligent and pure and most subtle” (Wis. 7:23)—meaning, I think, angelic powers as well as prophets and Apostles. He penetrates them simultaneously, though they are distributed in various places (Wis. 8:1); which shows that he is not tied down by spatial limitations.²¹¹

In this text there is neither a tidy differentiation of the Holy Spirit’s divinity proper, unique attributes, and distinctive operations, nor, among the Spirit’s operations, any strict separation between creative, revelatory, salvific, and ecclesial effects. For Nazianzen, all these hang together in a scheme of *theologia* and *oikonomia* carefully articulated across his *Theological Orations*, a scheme which, through patient “spiritual” rather than baldly literal interpretation, vindicates the Spirit as Creator in his irreducible relation to the Father and the Son, and renders coherent the Bible’s complex and multilayered language of the Holy Spirit.²¹²

Having dealt, albeit briefly, with the extended controversy over the trinitarian dignity of the Holy Spirit as Creator, I will now turn more specifically to the *oikonomia*. At this level, even though there was a rich variety of scriptural attestations to the virtues and operations of the Spirit—the unique epithet “Holy” itself evoking a wide set of attributions²¹³—I will focus attention on those most directly related to the Spirit’s work in creation and recreation.

The Mission of the Creator Spirit

For all the prolific writers whom we have been considering, not just Gregory Nazianzen, *oikonomia* and *theologia* were inextricable. Discerning the mystery

²¹¹ Or. 31.29 (= Or. theol. 5:29) (SC 250:334–6), trans. Wickham, *St. Gregory of Nazianzus: Of God and Christ*, 139–40 (slightly modified). For another extensive litany of the Spirit’s biblical titles and ascriptions, including his roles in creation, see Cyril of Jerusalem, *Cat.* 16–17 (PG 33:917–1012).

²¹² See Beeley, *Gregory of Nazianzus on the Trinity and the Knowledge of God*, 180–6.

²¹³ See Gregory of Nyssa, *Adv. Macedonians* (GNO 3.1:108).

of the Trinity depended on, and was interwoven with, a rigorously disciplined analysis of the cooperative “missions” and benefactions of the three Persons in the sacred history of the cosmos, the drama of the divine economy. Broadly speaking, in patristic theology and piety, the *creative* mission of the Holy Spirit in concert with the Father and the Son revolved around four cognate activities consistently (but not exclusively) associated with the Spirit: *animating, sanctifying, beautifying, perfecting*. The Creator Spirit spawns “life” in its greater-than-biological fullness. The Creator Spirit communicates divine holiness to the whole cosmos, funding creatures’ participation in God and ultimate deification. The Creator Spirit continues to bring order out of chaos and to disclose the latent beauty and newness of what has been created *ex nihilo*. And the Creator Spirit completes the creative operations of the triune Creator. All of these activities, for early Christian interpreters, were intrinsic to the biblical view of divine “creating.” From their perspective, as we have so often seen, *creating was not equatable with originating. Creating was an overarching and open-ended project of the divine economy that included nurturing, shaping, renewing, actualizing hidden potentialities, transforming, finishing.*

Animating

The numerous patristic commentators who interpreted the “hovering spirit” in Genesis 1:2 as the Holy Spirit rather than a timely, divinely-provisioned “wind” found here a decisive, indeed primordial evidence of the Spirit’s initiative in animating and ordering creation.²¹⁴ Important as this identification was, they also attended closely to the text’s depiction of how the Spirit “stirred,” or “hovered,” or “was born” (ἐπεφέρετο; *superferebatur*) over the watery chaos. Many exegetes (Basil, Jerome, Ambrose, et al.) in turn appropriated the Syrian commentator Eusebius of Emesa’s insight that in the Hebrew idiom such “hovering” evoked a mother bird “that warms its young under its wings and at the same time strokes them with tenderness and by brooding on (them), while shifting about.” Applied to the Holy Spirit in his divine stability, says Eusebius, this can only suitably mean that “he sustained, he attended to, he worked and he guided (cf. Isa. 63:14, LXX) . . . [but] ‘to be moving’ is not becoming for the Holy Spirit, unless ‘to be moving’ is something like (the expressions) God ‘descended’ and ‘ascended’”. In addition, Eusebius allows that the physical analogy of wind for the ineffable animating activity of the Holy Spirit is legitimate to the extent that wind (air) is a subtler element and closer to being incorporeal in its mobility.²¹⁵

²¹⁴ See my detailed discussion of this exegetical tradition in chap. 5, 113–14 and 115–16.

²¹⁵ Frag. 3 of Eusebius of Emesa’s *Comm. in Gen.* (Armenian recension), trans. Romeny, *A Syrian in Greek Dress*, 176–7; similarly cf. Augustine, *Gen. litt. imperf.* 4.18 (CSEL 28:1:470).

Eusebius hinted at an important issue later taken up by Augustine. How could the transcendent Holy Spirit animate the cosmos, or move about powerfully and dynamically in creation (e.g. dispensing “tongues of fire,” Acts 2:2) without himself descending into material form, paralleling the Son’s becoming incarnate? Not only did the Spirit not become “wind,” neither did he become “fire” or a “dove” in the same way that the Son became flesh as a culmination of his cosmic mission. The various material theophanies of the Spirit in creation rather testify, Augustine explains, to the Spirit’s sublime authority over natural phenomena, “‘creation serving the Creator’ (Wis. 16:24), and being changed and transmuted at the bidding of him who abides unchanging in himself.”²¹⁶ In this case the wind hovering over the waters in Genesis 1:2 can still also be plausibly understood at one level as “a vital force to which the almighty God (Holy Spirit) has granted a kind of power to serve him by acting in the things that are produced.”²¹⁷

Meanwhile patristic expositors resisted reducing the animating, life-giving activity of the Holy Spirit to a mere manipulation of natural elemental forces in the cosmos. In expounding the hovering Spirit at creation, Augustine in his earlier commentaries on Genesis defers to the rather mechanical image of a craftsman presiding over his raw materials,²¹⁸ but seeing that it is scarcely adequate he later determines that the Spirit was “born over” (*superferebatur*) the primeval waters in the sense of revealing how the Creator, unconstrained by any “need” to create, was lavishing his generous love on a yet incomplete, fledgling creation.²¹⁹ Whether using the image of a brooding hen or a nurturing breeze, both of which were especially evocative in presaging how the Spirit attended to the waters of baptism, most interpreters seized upon images of the Holy Spirit’s creative and recreative activity that conveyed his sovereignty, freedom, and mystical presence alike. Jesus’ illustration for Nicodemus of the *pneuma* that “blows wherever it wills” (John 3:8) in connection with spiritual rebirth or recreation was one such image. While some patristic commentators understood Jesus to be using an innocent natural analogy to describe the mysteriousness or the prerogative of the Spirit of God in granting new life,²²⁰ others, like Ambrose, Theodore of Mopsuestia, and Maximus, recognizing that physical wind has no will as such and moves arbitrarily, discerned a much more direct and nuanced expression of the Spirit’s omnipotence and freedom to move wherever he so desires in dispensing his creative grace.²²¹

²¹⁶ *De Trinitate* 2.6.11 (CCSL 50:94–5), trans. Hill, WSA 1.5:104.

²¹⁷ *Gen. litt. imperf.* 4.16–17 (CSEL 28.1:469–70), trans. Hill, WSA 1.13:122–3.

²¹⁸ cf. *Gen. Manich.* 1.5.8 (CSEL 91:74–5); *Gen. litt. imperf.* 4.16 (CSEL 28.1:469).

²¹⁹ *Gen. litt.* 1.7.13 (CSEL 28.1:10–11).

²²⁰ cf. John Chrysostom, *Hom. in Johannem* 26.1–2 (PG 59:154–5); id., *Hom. in 1 Cor.* 29.4 (PG 61:246); Cyril of Alexandria, *Comm. in Johannem* 2 (PG 73:245C–D).

²²¹ cf. Ambrose, *De fide* 2.6.47 (CSEL 78:72); id., *De Spiritu Sancto* 1.3.49; 1.11.118; 2.7.63–4 (CSEL 79:35, 66, 110–11); Theodore, *Comm. in Johannem* 2.3.8 (Syriac recension, CSCO

“Giver of life” (τὸ ζωοποιόν) proved to be one of the two preeminent titles of the Holy Spirit (along with “Lord”) enshrined in the creedal clause on the Spirit that was eventually integrated into the symbol of Nicea. The title was appropriately and necessarily comprehensive not only in view of the Spirit’s boundless creative power but also because “life” in its biblical and traditional usages burst forth in multiple dimensions and nuances. The Spirit was operative in the nurturing of creation, and in the vital insufflation of humanity (Gen. 2:7), as well as in the Pentecostal descent and the creation of the charismatic, moral-communal, and sacramental life of the church as the earnest of a new cosmos. “The breath of life, which rendered man animate, is one thing,” says Irenaeus, “and the vivifying Spirit another, which made him spiritual.”²²² The Spirit’s breath, as patristic commentators consistently discerned in Ezekiel’s vision of the valley of dry bones (Ezek. 37:1–14),²²³ was working to rejuvenate bodies—including Christ’s ecclesial body—in the eschatological mystery of resurrected life.

These and other manifestations of the “Giver of life” defy detailed treatment here;²²⁴ but all signified the “new creation” which, as we saw in the last chapter, early Christian theologians construed as the display of the infinite resourcefulness of the triune Creator and of the depth of revitalization he was effecting in everything created *ex nihilo*. The *new* creation was already nascent in the old. Basil, Gregory Nazianzen, Ambrose, and Nicetas of Remesiana, among others, appealed to Psalm 32(33):6—“By the word of the Lord the heavens were made firm, and by the breath (πνεῦμα) of his mouth all their host”—as testimony that the Logos had been working in intimate relation with the Spirit to establish *and renew* creation from its very inception.²²⁵ Connecting, therefore, the Spirit’s hovering over primordial waters *then* and baptismal waters *now* was no simple typology built on a dialectic of old and new. As Ambrose emphasizes, it signals a continuum of “hovering” and “working.”²²⁶

115:68–9), who explicitly denies that Jesus is referring here to physical wind; Maximus, *Qu. et dub.* 188 (CCSG 10:128). Also cf. Gregory of Nyssa, *C. Eun.* 2.197–8 (*Refutatio confessionis Eunomii*) (GNO 2:395–6); Augustine, *Serm.* 71.16.26 (PL 38:459).

²²² *Adv. haer.* 5.12.2 (SC 153:142–4). See also Hauschild, *Gottes Geistes und Mensch*, 206–20.

²²³ cf. Ambrose, *De excessu fratris sui Satyri* 2.71–76 (CSEL 73:288–91); id., *De Spiritu Sancto* 3.19.149–52 (CSEL 79:213–14); Jerome, *Comm. in Ezek.* 2.37.1–14 (CCSL 75:513).

²²⁴ For an anthology of patristic testimonies to the Spirit as “Giver of life,” see Joel Elowsky, ed., *We Believe in the Holy Spirit*, Ancient Christian Doctrine 4 (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 37–216; see also Cantalamessa, *Come, Creator Spirit*, esp. 23–39, 95–111.

²²⁵ cf. Basil, *C. Eun.* 3.4 (SC 305:156–8); Gregory Nazianzen, *Or.* 41.14 (SC 358:344–6); Ambrose, *De Spiritu Sancto* 1.3.51; 2.5.34–35; 2.9.100; 3.11.83; 3.22.170 (CSEL 79:36, 99–100, 125, 184, 221–2); id., *De mysteriis* 3.9 (CSEL 73:92); Nicetas, *De Spiritus Sancti potentia* 7 (Burn, 26).

²²⁶ *De mysteriis* 3.9 (CSEL 73:92): *Quia superferabatur, Moyses dicit, quia operabatur, David testificatur.*

Still, creation's *ultimate* revitalization remained for a fresh dispensation. Thus Irenaeus projects that the Pentecostal descent of the Spirit "in the last days" (Joel 2:27–29; Acts 2:17) was but a cooperation with the incarnate descent of the Son (also "in these last days," Heb. 1:2) in order for the Spirit "to dwell in the workmanship of God, fulfilling the Father's will in [creatures] and renewing them from their oldness to the newness of Christ."²²⁷

Sanctifying

Holiness (τὸ ἅγιον), Gregory of Nyssa asserts in his discourse against the Pneumatomachi, is not just the epithet but is of the *nature* of the Holy Spirit with the Father and the Son. Holiness subsumes the whole panoply of the Spirit's hypostatic virtues:

... life-giving power (τὸ ζωοποιόν), incorruptibility (τὸ ἀφθαρτον), unchangeableness (τὸ ἀναλλοίωτον), eternity (τὸ αἰδιον), justice (τὸ δίκαιον), wisdom (τὸ σόφον), rectitude (τὸ εὐθέες), sovereignty (τὸ ἡγεμονικόν), goodness (τὸ ἀγαθόν), power (τὸ δυνατόν), and the capacity to effect all good things (τὸ ἀγαθῶν πάντων παρεκτικόν), above all life itself. Dwelling everywhere, he is present also in each individual thing, and fills the earth while also remaining in heaven and pouring himself out upon the supramundane powers. He fills all things according to the merit of each while himself remaining full, and is present with all who are worthy without separating himself from the *Holy Trinity*.²²⁸

Particularly striking about this litany of virtues subsumed under the holiness of the Spirit is that most were also, in the Spirit's creative and salvific mission, *participable* virtues, destined to transform and deify creatures through imitation and appropriation. In later Byzantine patristic tradition these came under the designation of "uncreated energies" of God, in which creatures were granted participation without directly sharing in the divine essence.²²⁹ Didymus calls the Spirit himself "participable" (*capabilis* in Jerome's translation), though he clarifies in his treatise that the Spirit, being definitively God's Gift, grants and distributes participation in his virtues with no diminution of his divine being.²³⁰ The Spirit has not only infused natural life in all created beings, he anoints those found worthy with *divine* life, a share in the holiness

²²⁷ *Adv. haer.* 3.17.1 (SC 211:330): *habitere in plasmate Dei, voluntatem Patris operans in ipsis et renovans eos a vetustate in novitatem Christi.*

²²⁸ *Adv. Macedonianos* (GNO 3.1:108), with emphasis added in my translation. Nyssen also underscores, however, that the Spirit does not alone sanctify as this is also an action of the Father (John 17:11,17) and the Son (*Ad Eustathium*, GNO 9:11–12).

²²⁹ On the developing notion of "uncreated energies," see the pioneering study of Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (London: James Clarke, 1957), 67–90; and more recently Tollefsen, *The Christocentric Cosmology of St Maximus the Confessor*, 137–89.

²³⁰ See *De Spiritu Sancto* 11, 14, 16, 54–59 (on the Spirit as *capabilis*), 96–109, 231–6 (SC 386:152, 154, 156–8, 194–6, 234–46, 352–6).

proper to the integrity and sanctity of the triune Creator.²³¹ John Damascene clearly echoes his Greek predecessors in describing the Spirit as an inexhaustible source of sanctification and divinization: “uncreated, full, creative, all-ruling, all-working, all-capable, infinite in power, lording over all creation but not lorded over; *deifying but not deified, filling but not filled; participated in, not participating, sanctifying but not sanctified.*”²³²

Sanctification is a pregnant concept in biblical and patristic thought and should not be reduced exclusively to purification, though in traditional Jewish and Christian usage it has sometimes been virtually equated with processes of moral, spiritual, and ritual cleansing. At bottom, before considering its meaning for creatures contaminated by sin, patristic theologians generally viewed sanctification as rooted in the Spirit’s guardianship of the strict natural divide between (uncreated) Creator and creation. Sanctification arises from *difference*. The Creator alone is holy, while creation in its relative ontological poverty is dependent on that holiness for its own thriving. Gregory of Nyssa asks: If God is already altogether holy, why does Jesus see the need to instruct the faithful to “hallow” God’s name in the Lord’s Prayer (Matt. 6:9)? The answer is that without divine aid human nature is utterly helpless and can accomplish nothing good, including the ultimate good of glorifying God with a virtuous life.²³³ Such applies, says Basil, even to heavenly creatures who, not being holy by nature, endure in their holiness solely to the extent that they voluntarily participate in the sanctity of the Spirit. Without the Spirit, “the choruses of angels are disbanded, the dominions of archangels undone; all plunge into chaos and their life loses law, order, and definition.”²³⁴ “How would the Seraphim chant the Thrice-Holy (Isa. 6:3) without the Spirit teaching them the piety of how often they should voice this doxology?”²³⁵

If sanctification began with the radical difference between the Creator Spirit and his creation, its goal was conceived as creatures’ ultimate assimilation by grace to the holy, all-virtuous God. Needless to say, sanctification is an enormous theme in early Christian theology, sacramentology, and spiritual and ethical doctrine, so I shall restrict my comments to some of the broad contrasts that ensued between Eastern and Western patristic understandings of its outworking.

²³¹ Irenaeus, *Adv. haer.* 5.12.1–2 (SC 153:140–50); Gregory Nazianzen, *Or.* 30.20 (= *Or. theol.* 4.20) (SC 270:35–6), who credits the Son (Word) as providing the original insufflation of life (Gen. 2:7) and the Spirit as infusing breath in the “mouth of the mind” (στόμα τῆς διανοίας) for the prospering of spiritual life. Maximus (*Amb.* 42, PG 91:1324C–D) repeats Nazianzen’s view.

²³² *De fide orth.* 1.8 (PTS 12:26), with emphasis in my translation; and earlier, cf. Basil, *C. Eun.* 3.6 (SC 305:168); and in the West, Nicetas of Remesiana, *De Spiritu Sancti potentia* 5 (Burn, 23–4): *Spiritus sanctificat, non sanctificatur; inluminat, non inluminatur.*

²³³ *Hom. in orat. dom.* 3 (GNO 7.2:34–5).

²³⁴ *De Spiritu Sancto* 16.38 (PG 32:137A–B); id., *C. Eun.* 3.2 (SC 305:152–4).

²³⁵ *De Spiritu Sancto* 16.38 (PG 32:140A); id., *C. Eun.* 3.3 (SC 305:154).

In the Greek East, Origen early on deduces that, while the work of the Father and the Son extends to all created beings, the Spirit's properly sanctifying activity is exclusive to "saints" and in no way affects inanimate creatures, irrational animals, or the wicked or yet unconverted. The Father bequeaths being itself and the Logos the rationality leading creatures to well-being, but the Spirit grants holiness only "insofar as [the creature] is worthy" (*secundum meritum*; κατ' ἀξίαν).²³⁶ Von Balthasar, I think rightly, takes this phrase (which appears in Origen, Dionysius, and other Greek writers) to imply not that creatures could "deserve" grace but that there is "symmetry and harmony between the giver and the receiver, whereby the being and nature of the receiver is always already grounded in the allotted grace, and God primarily crowns his own gift, while correct (symmetrical) human behavior is taken up into this divinely established harmony secondarily and as a response to divine giving."²³⁷

Accordingly, the sanctifying grace of the Spirit, though reserved only for morally and spiritually worthy creatures, nonetheless stands in continuity with the grace of being and the grace of "rational" well-being. Later in the Cappadocians, Maximus, and other major Eastern (including Syriac) theologians, sanctification is a grace, to be sure, and yet it operates in relation to creaturely natures already ontologically open or rationally predisposed to its transformative effects. Sanctification unfolds within the natural as well as supernatural teleology of human nature. As Nyssen puts it succinctly, Jesus would never have commanded perfect purity (Matt. 5:8) had it not already been possible for creatures, otherwise grace would overpower and violate created natures.²³⁸ The emphasis on the cooperation (συνεργία) between Spirit (grace) and creature (free will) in sanctification and deification in turn became a major leitmotif in Pseudo-Macarius,²³⁹ John Cassian,²⁴⁰ Mark the Monk,²⁴¹ Diadochus of Photiki,²⁴² and many other sources in the Eastern ascetical tradition,

²³⁶ *De princ.* 1.3.7–8 (SC 252:156–64).

²³⁷ Von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. 2: *Studies in Theological Style: Clerical Styles*, trans. Andrew Louth et al. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1984), 171–2.

²³⁸ *Hom. in beat.* 6 (GNO 7.2:140). On Gregory's understanding of the "synergy" of divine and human freedom in sanctification, see Verna Harrison, *Grace and Human Freedom according to St. Gregory of Nyssa* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1992), 215–49, with abundant exemplary texts.

²³⁹ From Collection II of his *Homilies* in Heinrich Dörries, Erich Klostermann, and Matthias Kroeger, eds., *Die 50 geistlichen Homilien des Makarios*, PTS 4 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1964), see *Hom.* 8.2 (PTS 4:77–8); 9.7 (PTS 4:86–7); 18.5–11 (PTS 4:179–82), speaking of the "ἐνέργεια of the Spirit" at 18.6; *Hom.* 27.13 (PTS 4:225); *Hom.* 37.10 (PTS 4:269–70).

²⁴⁰ See e.g. *Collationes* 3.12, 17–19; 10.10; 13.8–13 (CSEL 13:84–5, 89–92, 297–302, 370–84).

²⁴¹ The synergy of grace and creaturely free will (leading to authentic spiritual freedom) is a key presupposition of Mark's paired treatises *De lege spirituali* (SC 445:74–128) and *De his qui putant se ex operibus justificari* (SC 445:130–200).

²⁴² In his *Kephalaia gnostica* (*Chapters on Spiritual Knowledge*) 16, 33, 34, 78, 99 (SC 5^{bis}:93, 103, 104, 136, 161), Diadochus refers to the "energy of the Holy Spirit" (ἐνέργεια τοῦ ἁγίου πνεύματος) which informs the will and works with it to embrace love and the other virtues.

including many of the authors eventually incorporated into the *Philokalia*. Mark the Monk provides an especially lucid summary of the sanctifying grace of the Spirit communicated through baptism and unfolding progressively: “Christ, being perfect God, bestows on the baptized the grace of the Spirit. We add nothing to that grace; it is revealed to and manifested in us in proportion to our performance of the commandments, and provides us the added assistance of faith, ‘until we all attain to perfect manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ’ (Eph. 4:13).”²⁴³

Augustine and his Western legatees begged to differ, especially as responding to what they perceived as a similar teleology of creaturely perfectibility in Pelagian doctrine strongly inspired by Origen. Not only in his anti-Pelagian works but in others as well from his episcopal career, Augustine ultimately rejects any teaching that remotely appears, in his judgment, to reduce sanctifying grace to an “immanent causality” or to project Creator and creature as symmetrical agents of sanctification in an ongoing dialectical relation.²⁴⁴ We can reasonably assume, for example, that Augustine would have protested Maximus the Confessor’s later claim that Creator and creature are “paradigms” (παράδειγματα) of each other, and that the philanthropic Creator reaches out incarnationally to humanity insofar as humanity, “enabled by God through love” (τῷ θεῷ δι’ ἀγάπης), reaches back to God and so deifies itself (ἐαυτὸν ἀπεθέωσε) in practicing godly virtues.²⁴⁵ Nor would Augustine, I think, have been satisfied with Maximus’ caveat, thoroughly consonant with Eastern patristic tradition, that sanctification is grounded *primarily* in divine loving-kindness (φιλανθρωπία) and only *secondarily* in creatures’ natural capacity to imitate that love and to cultivate virtue. Augustine’s creature remains ever unstable on its own terms, poised precariously between pure formlessness (nothingness) and the form granted wholly gratuitously by the Trinity. While Augustine vigorously and consistently defends the basic goodness of created natures, his view of sanctification and deification ultimately turns on the Creator continuously rescuing the creature from both its “natural” corruptibility²⁴⁶ and its actual postlapsarian depravity, accomplished as extrinsic liberation, adoption, and reformation. Christ, the perfect God-man, mediates the deification of creatures,²⁴⁷ and the Holy Spirit, Gift and Giver, the very essence of divine love (*dilectio*), is the “Spirit of adoption” (Rom. 8:15) who, as Augustine affirms in various texts, sanctifies creatures by releasing

²⁴³ *De baptismo, responsio* 17 (SC 445:394–6). Similarly, cf. Maximus the Confessor, *Qu. Thal.* 6 (CCSG 7:69–71).

²⁴⁴ See Michael Hanby’s excellent analysis of this theme, *Augustine and Modernity*, 82–90.

²⁴⁵ Maximus, *Amb.* 10 (PG 91:1113B–C).

²⁴⁶ See e.g. *De natura boni* 10 (CSEL 25.2:859).

²⁴⁷ As highlighted by Gerald Bonner, “Augustine’s Conception of Deification,” *Journal of Theological Studies* N.S. 37 (1986): 369–85, and esp. 373–9. One particularly lucid text is *De Trinitate* 4.2.4 (CCSL 50:164).

them *from* their bondage to sin, disabling fear, the law, and death itself,²⁴⁸ and releasing them *to* the freedom of their own true form.

Beautifying

Where Augustine and the Eastern Fathers could have found common ground, albeit on negative terms, was in their respective intuitions that the goal of sanctification by the Creator Spirit is not a mere mechanical conformity of creatures to an eschatological or transcendent holiness. Christian Platonic exemplarism East and West—such as we earlier observed in the different conceptions of “actual” creation fulfilling the divine pattern of the “simultaneous” or “ideal” creation²⁴⁹—was from the outset tempered by the fierce realism of the Bible’s own depiction of the Creator’s arduous mission to see his creatures from formlessness to full form. For those Christian writers like Irenaeus, the Cappadocians, Ambrose, Augustine, and Dionysius the Areopagite who variously envision the Creator as an Artisan in his creative freedom, wisdom, love, and infinite resourcefulness, the beautiful form (*εἶδος*; *forma*; *species*) of the creature is necessarily disclosed in the *oikonomia* itself and not purely in the finished product, at the eschatological denouement when creation finally attains its ultimate likeness (*ὁμοίωσις*) to the Creator. Von Balthasar, for example, justifiably reads Irenaeus’ influential doctrine of cosmic recapitulation as a profoundly *aesthetic* construction, in the sense that the creative “process” unfolds from beginning to end as the divine art of drawing into magnificent unity the different strands and phases of creatures’ formation, in a way that allows for beings to participate *creatively* in their own perfection.²⁵⁰

As Basil remarks of the recurrent Hexaemeral phrase *Καὶ εἶδεν ὁ θεὸς ὅτι καλὸν* (Gen. 1:4,8,10,12,18,21,25,31)—literally translatable “And God saw that it was *beautiful*”—the beautifying of creation begins (and ends) in the triune Creator’s own delight in his good work. Authentic beauty lies in the gaze of the great Beholder and Artist (*τεχνίτης*) as he looks on his creation. This beauty transcends mere visual delight (*τέρψις*), and yet what the Creator “sees” is “that which is brought to perfection according to the principle of art (*τῷ λόγῳ τῆς τέχνης*) and which contributes to the usefulness of its end (*πρὸς τὴν τοῦ τέλους εὐχρησίαν*).”²⁵¹ Basil’s subtlety here is important. This beauty is

²⁴⁸ That this “Spirit of adoption” is indeed the Holy Spirit, see *Prop. ad Rom.* 52 (Fredriksen Landes, 22); cf. also *De fide et symbolo* 9.19 (CSEL 41:203–5); *Tract. in Johannem* 85.3 (CCSL 36:539–40); *Serm.* 156.14–15 (CCSL 41Ba:156–9).

²⁴⁹ See above, chap. 6, 145–66.

²⁵⁰ *The Glory of the Lord*, 2:31–94 (on Irenaeus), at 51–5. Von Balthasar cites, in particular, Irenaeus’ clear statement of how Jesus Christ as the Last Adam recapitulates Adam “from beginning to end” (*Adv. haer.* 5.23.2, SC 153:290–2).

²⁵¹ *Hom. in hex.* 3.10 (PTS NF 2:55); cf. *ibid.* 1.7 (PTS NF 2:13).

teleological; it does not reflect back on itself but points beyond to the Creator's ultimate and ineffable purpose (σκοπός; τέλος²⁵²). Moreover, insofar as beauty has to do with form (i.e. light, proportion [ἀναλογία],²⁵³ relation, etc.), it has to be gradually *revealed to and in* creatures as well as *perceived by and in* them, for the creature in some sense *becomes* what it sees, and must participate in the Creator's vision of it. Hence, creatures' pious contemplation of the beauty being revealed to and in them is one thing; but there is no ultimate vision without their active participation in the drama of their perfection—a view that Basil reinforces with his image of the faithful as competitors in the cosmic amphitheatre striving and struggling to discover the deep meaning (and beauty) of their own existence.²⁵⁴

According to Ambrose, the specific work of the Holy Spirit in beautifying creatures is to uncover and illumine their latent beauty. He recurs once more to the hovering Spirit in Genesis 1:2:

So when the Spirit was moving upon the water, the creation was without grace; but after this world being created underwent the operation of the Spirit, *it gained all the beauty of that grace*, wherewith the world is illuminated. And that the grace of the universe cannot abide without the Holy Spirit the prophet declared when he said: "You will take away your Spirit, and they will fail and be turned again into their dust. Send forth your Spirit, and they will be made, and you will renew all the face of the earth" (Ps. 103[104]:29–30).²⁵⁵

We have seen before, in considering the principle of creation *ex nihilo*, this idea that creation from its inception was threatened with resolving into chaos, but that in the hands of the Creator the chaos merely became the raw material of a new and glorious order. Revealing hidden beauty thus merges here with the Spirit's roles as Animator, Sanctifier, and Perfecter. Irenaeus had already explicitly made this connection in admonishing created beings to yield to their Artificer, and specifically to the "hand" and "fingers" of the Creator—both of which images Irenaeus and others used to identify the creative agency of the Holy Spirit:

If, therefore, you are a work of God, await the hand (χεῖρα; *manum*) of your Artificer, which creates all things in due course—in due course, that is, with respect to you who are being created. Offer him your heart, supple and tractable, and guard the form (μορφή; *figuram*) in which your Artisan (τεχνίτης; *artifex*) fashioned you; for you have moisture within you from him so that you will not become hardened and lose the imprint of his fingers (δακτύλων; *digitorum*). But by keeping compliant you will ascend to perfection, for the clay that is in you is hidden there by the art of God (ὑπὸ τῆς τέχνης; *ab artificio Dei*). His hand

²⁵² *Hom. in hex.* 3.10 (PTS NF 2:55).

²⁵³ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁴ *Hom. in hex.* 6.1 (PTS NF 2:87–8).

²⁵⁵ *De Spiritu Sancto* 2.5.33 (CSEL 79:99); trans. NPNF²10:118–19 (slightly modified; emphasis added). This text is quoted more fully above in chap. 5, 117–18.

fashioned your substance. It will deck you internally and externally with pure gold and silver, and will adorn you to the point that even “the King himself will desire your beauty” (Ps. 44:12[45:11]). But if, becoming obdurate, you spurn his artistry, and prove ungrateful to him for having made you a mere human being, then because of your ingratitude you will have lost both his artistry and life itself. For creating belongs properly to God’s goodness, whereas being created is proper to human nature. So if you deliver up to him what is yours, namely faith and subjection to him, then you will acquire his art and be a perfect work of God.²⁵⁶

The gradual and mysterious revelation of divine beauty in the creature also took on enormous significance in Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine, and Dionysius the Areopagite, all of whom critically reworked elements of Neoplatonic aesthetics. For Nyssen even more than for Basil, *seeing is becoming*,²⁵⁷ and the vision of beauty, including not simply the phenomenal beauty of material creation but also the intelligible beauty mirrored in the created soul, closely binds his trinitarian theology, cosmology, and spiritual doctrine. Key to a creature’s assimilation to God is the deep perception of—fueling a desire for—the *infinite* Beauty of the Creator, his “unspeakable blessedness” (ἄφραστος μακαριότης),²⁵⁸ or what David Bentley Hart evocatively calls “the trinitarian beauty that is motile, various, creative, abundant in signs of peace.”²⁵⁹ The converse side of that reality for human creatures, however, is the ontological mutability (and potential instability) of their nature, where once more the infatuation with material things (however intrinsically good those things might be) threatens to undercut them unless they are progressively and “ecstatically” drawn onward and upward by the power of the Holy Spirit

²⁵⁶ *Adv. haer.* 4.39.2 (SC 100:966–8). Irenaeus and others on occasion identify the creative “Hand” of God as the Logos/Son: cf. *Adv. haer.* 4.20.1 (SC 100:626); Theophilus of Antioch, *Ad Autol.* 2.18 (Grant, 56); Didymus, *De Spiritu Sancto* 87 (SC 386:224–6); Evagrius Ponticus, *Ep. ad Melaniam* 2, trans. Martin Parmentier, “Evagrius of Pontus’ ‘Letter to Melania,’” *Bijdragen Tijdschrift voor Filosofie en Theologie* 46 (1985): 9; Ambrose, *De Spiritu Sancto* 3.3.11; 3.4.18 (CSEL 79:154–5, 158). But Irenaeus can also call the Spirit the Hand of God, as also in *Adv. haer.* 4.20.1 (SC 100:626); cf. *Hom. Ps-Clementina* 16.12 (GCS 42:223–4). On the Holy Spirit as the “Finger” of God, usually in reference to Ex. 31:18, Luke 11:20, and Matt. 12:28, cf. Irenaeus, *Epideixis* 26 (PO 12.5:679–80); *Hom. Ps-Clem.* 11.22 (GCS 42:165); Didymus, *De Spiritu Sancto* 87 (SC 386:226; with Doutreleau’s note, p. 395); Basil, *Ep.* 8.11 (PG 32:265A–B); Ambrose, *De Spiritu Sancto* 3.3.11; 3.5.29 (CSEL 79:154–5, 162); John Chrysostom, *Hom. in Matt.* 41.2 (PG 57:447); Augustine, *De Trinitate* 2.15.26 (CCSL 50:114); Cyril of Alexandria, *Comm. in Lucam*, *Hom.* 81 (Syriac recension), trans. Robert Payne Smith (reprinted Studion Publishers, 1983), 331. Ambrose allows that, scripturally, both Word and Spirit can be designated as the “Hands” and “Fingers” (plural) of God (ibid. 3.5.32–4, PL 16:783C–784A). On these and other analogies of the “tangibility” of the Son and Spirit in patristic usage, see also McDonnell, *The Other Hand of God*, 109–20, 196–8.

²⁵⁷ See *Hom. in Cant.* 4 (GNO 6:105–7).

²⁵⁸ *De hom. opif.* 5 (PG 44:137A).

²⁵⁹ Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite*, 142.

toward the gracious and beautiful Object of their desire.²⁶⁰ “Reflecting as the mirror does,” writes Gregory, “when it submits itself to the purity of God, [the soul] will be formed according to its participation in and reflection of the prototypal beauty.”²⁶¹ “For perhaps the very perfection of human nature consists precisely in desiring to possess beauty ever more fully.”²⁶² The principle of beauty (τὸ καλόν) serves Gregory well in trying to hold together the elusiveness-but-fecundity of divine transcendence, the relative goodness of the *material* context of creatures’ moral and spiritual development, the role of desire and spiritual vision in that development, and not least the role of the Holy Spirit in gifting creatures with divine beauty. Patrick Sherry justly concludes, then, that for Gregory the Spirit is “both *beautiful* and in virtue of his mission, *beautifier*; beautiful as reflecting the Father’s glory, and beautifier because of his role in creation and because of his gifts to us.”²⁶³

For Augustine, especially in his early episcopal works, including the *Confessions* and his Genesis commentaries, creation is already a complex communication of divine beauty, or more precisely, a glorious process of illumination, formation, conversion—a theme I treated earlier in connection with his scrupulous analysis of the *fiat lux* (Gen. 1:3).²⁶⁴ The primordial illumination of creation (beginning with the angels) and the implanting of the *rationes seminales* point ahead to the actualization of multifaceted beauty in creatures. Michael Hanby has dubbed Augustine’s entire cosmology an “aesthetic soteriology,” while Carol Harrison has characterized it as a “revelation of form.”²⁶⁵ Both are apposite descriptions. But valid as well is von Balthasar’s observation that “Augustine’s path . . . is one from a lower to a higher aesthetics.”²⁶⁶ Continuities aside, there is real development in his thought on the beauty of creation. In earlier works like *On True Religion*, he is defending the beneficent order and beauty of creation against Manichaeans while also trying to wean the faithful from fixity on earthly loveliness so as to attach their desires to the

²⁶⁰ *De virg.* 10–12 (GNO 8.1:288–302); *Hom. in Cant.* 4 (GNO 6:101–7); *ibid.* 6 (GNO 6:173–4); *ibid.* 8 (GNO 6:245–7); cf. also *De hom. opif.* 12 (PG 44:161C–164A).

²⁶¹ *De virg.* 11 (GNO 8.1:296), trans. Callahan, FOTC 58:41.

²⁶² *V. Moysis, lib. 1* (GNO 7.1:5, ll. 2–4). Beauty in Nyssen’s thought has become a central theme in recent scholarship: e.g. von Balthasar, *Presence and Thought*, 37–69, 89–108, 121–9, 153–69; Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite*, 142, 144, 188–210, 235–6, 243–4, 275–6, 402–11; Patrick Sherry, *Spirit and Beauty*, 2nd ed. (London: SCM, 2002), 55–6, 83–4; Ludlow, *Gregory of Nyssa: Ancient and (Post)modern*, 145–7.

²⁶³ Sherry, *Spirit and Beauty*, 84.

²⁶⁴ See above, chap. 5, 121–3.

²⁶⁵ Hanby, *Augustine and Modernity*, 27–71; Harrison, *Beauty and Revelation in the Thought of Saint Augustine*, 36–45 *et passim*. See also Maarten Wisse, “Augustine’s Trinitarian Aesthetics in *De Trinitate*,” in Wil van den Bercken and Jonathan Sutton, eds., *Aesthetics as a Religious Factor in Eastern and Western Christianity* (Leuven: Peeters, 2005), 405–15.

²⁶⁶ von Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord*, 2:95; and see his larger discussion, *ibid.*, 94–143; see also *id.*, *The Glory of the Lord*, vol. 1: *Seeing the Form*, trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982), 162–6 *et passim*.

beautiful Creator.²⁶⁷ Later, in the *City of God*, all this created beauty is relativized as “solace” in a fallen world condemned to misery.²⁶⁸ Still later in *On the Trinity* Augustine sees the light of divine beauty even more intensely and prolifically refracted through the prism of Jesus Christ, the incarnate, crucified, and risen Lord who is the very substance of divine wisdom and beauty.²⁶⁹ As the Holy Spirit for Augustine is divine love, he communicates the beauty of the Trinity, the beauty of intra-trinitarian love embodied in Jesus Christ, to fallen creatures so as to recover their lost beauty and to supplant their sinful deformity with resilient Christ-like form.²⁷⁰ Romans 5:5, describing how *caritas* “has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us,” proves a consistently definitive text for Augustine (as it also had been for Ambrose) in eliciting the properly *formative* role of the Spirit.²⁷¹

Writing perhaps a century after Augustine, and in a quite different context, Dionysius the Areopagite offers yet another highly nuanced and panoramic perspective on the divine beauty communicated to creation, a perspective grounded in his intense and sophisticated theological apophaticism. Given

²⁶⁷ See e.g. *De ordine* 1.1.1–4; 1.7.18; 1.9.27; 2.4.11–13 (CSEL 63:121–4, 133, 139, 154–6); *Soliloquia* 1.5.11–1.14.26 (CSEL 89:18–40); *De libero arbitrio* 2.16.41–2.17.46 (CSEL 74:77–81); *De vera religione* 3.3; 18.35–25.46; 39.72–54.106 (CCSL 32:188–90, 205–16, 234–55); also *Conf.* 2.5.10; 2.6.12; 4.10.15; 4.13.20; 7.17.23; 10.6.8–10; 12.2.2; 13.2.3 (CCSL 27:22, 23, 48, 50–1, 107, 158–60, 217, 243). There is development as well in Augustine’s view of how divine beauty abides the existential evil in creation. See Gillian Evans, *Augustine on Evil* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

²⁶⁸ *De civ. Dei* 22.24 (CCSL 48:851).

²⁶⁹ As Hanby (*Augustine and Modernity*, 29) rightly notes, Augustine’s direct or indirect identification of Christ (the Word) as the substance of beauty and form appears already in early works like *De div. quaest.* 10 (CCSL 44A:18); *De vera religione* 36.66 (CCSL 32:230–1), and a little later *Conf.* 13.2.3 (CCSL 27:243), and still later *Tract. in Ep. Johannis* 9.9 (SC 75:396–400). In the *De Trinitate*, with its strong emphasis on the Son as the *substance* of Wisdom and Christ as divine Wisdom incarnate (see 6.1.1–6.2.3; 7.1.1–7.3.5, CCSL 50:228–31, 244–54) that identification is more pronounced. Christ is simultaneously both the “*form* of God” and the “*form* of a servant” (Phil. 2:6–7) (1.7.14–1.8.15, CCSL 50:44–9), and as Lewis Ayres points out, this becomes not just a key for analyzing scriptural texts that speak respectively of Jesus’ divinity and humanity but is a positive axiom urging the faithful “to see what is said and done in *forma servi* as a drawing of our desires and intellects toward the *forma Dei* that will remain hidden until the Eschaton” (Ayres, *Augustine and the Trinity*, 146–7). Elsewhere, in *De Trinitate* 6.10.11 (CCSL 50:241–2), Augustine embraces Hilary’s summary of the trinitarian properties: “Eternity in the Father, form in the Image [= Son], use in the Gift [= Spirit]” (Hilary, *De Trinitate* 2.1, SC 443:276). Supremely in the Son, Augustine explains, we see pure likeness to God, and the accord of pure being and living, which is given to creaturely “enjoyment” and “use” through the love which is the Holy Spirit.

²⁷⁰ See early on *De fide et symbolo* 9.18 (CSEL 41:21–2); later *De Trinitate* 6.5.7; 6.10.11; 7.3.6 (CCSL 50:235–6, 241–2, 254); *ibid.* 13.10.14; 15.17.28–29; 15.17.31–15.18.32 (CCSL 50A:400, 502–4, 505–8). See also Ayres’ analysis in *Augustine and the Trinity*, 88–92, 258–62.

²⁷¹ On the significance of Rom. 5:5 for Augustine, see A.M. la Bonnardière, “Le verset paulinien Rom. v.5 dans l’oeuvre d’Augustin,” in *Augustin Magister: Congrès International Augustinien Paris, 21–24 septembre 1954* (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1954), 2:657–65; also Ayres, *Augustine and the Trinity*, 53–4, 57–8, 254.

his prescription that God is “beyond being” (*ὑπερούσιος*) and even “beyond divinity” (*ὑπέρθεος*),²⁷² Dionysius grants that the Creator can be named “Beauty” (*καλόν*) or “beautiful” (*κάλλος*) only in the sense that he sources the beauty of all created beings.²⁷³ As Good itself (*ταγαθόν*) he is formless (*ἀνείδενον*) but “creates all form” (*ἐίδοποιεῖ*).²⁷⁴ He funds a beam of generous immaterial light that radiates down through all the ranks of creatures, forming their bodily life, nourishing them, purifying and perfecting them, illumining their intellects, and disposing them toward the image of the Good so that they have beauty in relation to each other and to the Creator.²⁷⁵

... the small, the equal, the great in nature, the measure and proportion of all things, the mixtures, the totalities, and the parts of things, the universal one and the many, the links between parts, the unity underlying everything, the perfection of wholes. From it come quality, quantity, magnitude and infinity, conglomeration and distinction, the limitless and the limited, boundaries, orders and super-achievements, elements and forms, all being, power, and activity, all states, perception, and expression, all conception, apprehension, understanding, all union. To put the matter briefly, all being derives from, exists in, and is returned toward the Beautiful and the Good.²⁷⁶

Copious and elegant in his portrait of the hierarchies of creation and divine revelation, and of creation’s liturgy in praise of its Creator, Dionysius shows no need to dwell on the details of the precise roles of Christ and the Holy Spirit in the economy of beautifying the world—especially when his focus is on the unity of the divine activity (*ἐνέργεια*) and procession. Certainly he celebrates the incarnation and Jesus’ role in embodying the gracious light descending from the Creator;²⁷⁷ but he says precious little about the precise workings of the Spirit. Von Balthasar is probably correct that Dionysius knew his predecessors’ achievements and saw no need to repeat their insights; nor did he desire to reintroduce issues that had once ignited significant controversy in the church.²⁷⁸ It is quite plausible, then, that the Areopagite merely presupposes teachings on the Holy Spirit’s role as Animator, Sanctifier, Beautifier, and

²⁷² On God as *ὑπερούσιος* see *De div. nom.* 1.1; 1.3; 1.5; 2.4; 4.19; 13.1 (PTS 33:99, 116, 126, 163–4); *Ep.* 4 (PTS 36:160); and as *ὑπέρθεος* see *De div. nom.* 2.4; 4.1; 11.6 (PTS 33:126, 143, 222).

²⁷³ *De div. nom.* 4.7 (PTS 33:150–1).

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.* 4.3 (PTS 33:146).

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.* 4.4–7 (PTS 33:146–53).

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.* 4.10 (PTS 33:154), trans. Colm Luibheid, *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, CWS (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 79. See also *ibid.* 4.7 (PTS 33:152): “Beauty unites all things and is the source of all things. It is the great creating cause which bestirs the world and holds all things in existence by the longing inside them to have beauty” (trans. Luibheid, CWS, 77).

²⁷⁷ See *ibid.* 1.4; 2.3; 11.5 (PTS 33:113, 125–6, 221); *De cael. hier.* 1.2; 4.4; 7.2 (PTS 36:7, 22–3, 29); *De eccl. hier.* 1.1; 3.5 (PTS 36:63–4, 84). In *De div. nom.* 2.10 (PTS 33:134) Dionysius calls the divinity of Jesus “the form which is the source of form for the formless.”

²⁷⁸ von Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord*, 2:151–2.

Perfecter that he inherited from antecedent Eastern patristic and monastic tradition.

Perfecting

As with his other cognate roles in the *oikonomia*, the Spirit's work as Perfecter is grounded in the antecedently stable, irreducible relations within the Trinity. As Perfecter, the Spirit does not fill some "deficit" in the divine *energeia*, a point on which Basil is especially emphatic. In creation the Father is the "original cause" (προκαταρκτική αἰτία), the Son the "creative cause" (δημιουργική αἰτία), and the Holy Spirit the "perfecting cause" (τελειωτική αἰτία),²⁷⁹ but not as if some imperfection obtained in the causative roles of Father and Son:

For the first principle (ἀρχή) of existing things is One [Father], creating through the Son and perfecting through the Spirit. The operation (ἐνέργεια) of the Father who works all in all is not imperfect; neither is the creating work of the Son incomplete if not perfected by the Spirit. The Father, who creates by his sole will, could not stand in any need of the Son, but nevertheless he wills through the Son; nor could the Son, who works according to the likeness of the Father, need cooperation (συνεργίας), but the Son too wills to make perfect through the Spirit . . . You are, then, to perceive three [hypostases], the Lord who gives the order (προτάσσοντα), the Word who creates (δημιουργούντα), and the Spirit who confirms (στερεοῦν). And what other thing could confirmation be than the perfecting according to holiness? This perfecting expresses the confirmation's firmness, unchangeableness, and fixity in Good.²⁸⁰

In the register of the *oikonomia*, however, where the distinctive hypostatic initiatives of the Trinity's common *energeia* become manifest, the perfecting role of the Spirit does indeed translate into an all-out "cooperation" (συνεργία; *cooperatio*) of the three Persons in which the Spirit brings to completion the work of the Father and the Son.²⁸¹ Maximus the Confessor, for example, employs such a formula with respect to the incarnation itself: the Father "approving" (εὐδοκῶν) it, the Son "carrying it out" (αὐτοουργῶν), and the Holy Spirit "cooperating" (συνεργοῦν) in it and "completing" (συμπληροῦν) the Father's approval and the Son's execution of it.²⁸² Maximus also indicates

²⁷⁹ *De Spiritu Sancto* 16.38 (PG 32:136B).

²⁸⁰ Ibid. (PG 32:136B–C), trans. NPNF² 8:23–4 (slightly altered). Similarly, cf. Gregory of Nyssa, *Or. in baptismum Christi* (GNO 9:229), who grounds the trine immersion in the Father as "primal cause (ἀρχή) of all things," the Son as "Maker of creation" (δημιουργός τῆς κτίσεως), and the Holy Spirit as "the power perfecting all things" (τελειωτικόν τῶν παντῶν).

²⁸¹ See e.g. Ambrose, *De Spiritu Sancto* 3.4.19–28 (CSEL 79:158–62).

²⁸² *Expositio orationis dominicae* (CCSG 23:32); *Qu. Thal.* 2 (CCSG 7:51); *ibid.* 60 (CCSG 22:81). See also Felix Heinzer, "L'explication trinitaire de l'économie chez Maxime le Confesseur," in Heinzer and Schönborn, *Maximus Confessor*, 160–72.

that this same gracious cooperation of the Trinity has always been operative in creation, enabling the whole Trinity to be “through all and in all things” (Eph. 4:6).²⁸³

Here a distinction should be drawn between the properly *teleological* and the eschatological work of the Spirit. Though the perfecting operations of the Spirit will not be consummated until the eschaton, the actual perfection (τελειώσις) of creatures was already underway at their very first creation. Basil points to the heavenly beings who were not created holy or perfect by nature and needed the sanctifying grace of the Spirit as soon as they were made.²⁸⁴ But the same holds true of other creatures. Cyril of Alexandria, for example, maintains that when the Holy Spirit originally breathed life into humanity (Gen. 2:7) he was already forming, indwelling, renewing, and perfecting human nature.²⁸⁵ There could be no question, then, of relegating the Spirit’s perfecting work to the last days, in a manner like the medieval Italian visionary Joachim of Fiore (1135–1202), who projected a chronological succession of three “ages,” that of the Father (the Old Testament dispensation), that of the Son (the age of the incarnation and its impact), and at last that of the Holy Spirit (the end of time leading to judgment and the final consummation). As I argued in detail in chapter six, many of the major patristic thinkers understood the purposive *telos* of creation already to be present or nascent in its “beginning,” in keeping with their conviction that the Son (Logos) and the Spirit were co-Creators together with the Father in founding the world and giving it form.

The perfecting operations of the Holy Spirit recapitulate his whole work in the divine economy. As in the bestowing of life, sanctification, and beauty, the Spirit grants perfection to creation solely as a participation in the unqualified and inexhaustible perfection of the triune Creator. Basil once again provides a good summation, describing the Spirit in the *oikonomia* as:

... in power infinite, in magnitude unlimited, unmeasured by times or ages, generous of his good gifts, to whom turn all things needing sanctification, after whom reach all things that live in virtue, as being watered by his inspiration and helped on toward their natural and proper end; perfecting all other things, but himself in nothing lacking; living not as needing restoration, but as Supplier of life; not growing by additions; but straightway full, self-established, omnipresent, origin of sanctification, light perceptible to the mind, supplying, as it were, through himself, illumination to every faculty in the search for truth; by nature unapproachable, apprehended by reason of goodness, filling all things with his power (cf. Wis. 1:7), but communicated only to the worthy; not shared in one

²⁸³ *Qu. Thal.* 2 (CCSG 7:51).

²⁸⁴ *De Spiritu Sancto* 16.38 (PG 32:137A–B).

²⁸⁵ *Comm. in Johannem* 2 (PG 73:204D–205A); *ibid.* 5 (PG 73:756D–757A); *ibid.* 9 (PG 74:277B); *ibid.* 11 (PG 74:541C).

measure, but distributing his energy according to “the proportion of faith” (Rom. 12:6); in essence simple, in powers various, wholly present in each and being wholly everywhere; impassively divided, shared without loss of ceasing to be entire, after the likeness of the sunbeam, whose kindly light falls on the one who enjoys it as though it shone for that one alone, yet illumines land and sea and mingles with the air. So, too, is the Spirit to everyone who receives it, as though given to each one alone, and yet he sends forth grace sufficient and full for all humankind, and is enjoyed by all who share him, according to the capacity, not of his power, but of their nature.²⁸⁶

III. SUMMARY: DIVINE ENACTMENT OF THE NEW CREATION

In this chapter I have attempted to add more weight to three recurrent emphases: first, that the theology of creation emergent in the early church (before and after Nicea) was ultimately driven less by the dictates of philosophical cosmology than by sustained, tireless exposition of the divine economy revealed in Scripture; second, that a doctrine of creation was not just about beginnings or ends but about the triune Creator’s whole *strategy*—a word I propose as a virtual if not literal translation of “economy,” *οἰκονομία*—in the great “middle” or “history” of creation; and third (and yet again), that creation and salvation are thoroughly interwoven in that history and cannot be extricated from each other without violating the consensus perspective of patristic thinking East and West on the origin, constitution, and destiny of the universe.

More specifically in this chapter I have tried to bring into sharper focus early Christian interpretations of the triune Creator’s “performances” in enacting the new creation through the joint initiatives of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, co-Creators with the Father in the drama of the divine economy. Concepts of *creatio continua*, or the providential preservation (*συντήρησις*; *conservatio*) of the world, “recapitulation,” or even “new creation” become nebulous if abstracted from the concrete divine engagements with creatures in time and space. In turn early Christian commentators aimed to elucidate how the definitive actions of Christ and the Spirit embodied divine creativity in its ongoing and variegated expressions.

Influential Greek, Syriac, and Latin theologians took their cues from the New Testament’s own affirmations of Jesus Christ as Creator in his own right, and in their turn they looked for further ways to dramatize his creative agencies. Ultimately they favored christopractic over theopractic language to enhance

²⁸⁶ *De Spiritu Sancto* 9.22 (PG 32:108B–C); trans. NPNF² 8:15 (slightly modified).

all the more his subjective initiative in the *oikonomia*. François-Marie L  thel, in his trenchant study of Maximus the Confessor's Christology, mentions Maximus' accent on the "*fiat* of Jesus," the prerogative of his humanity and not just his divinity to accomplish the will of the Father.²⁸⁷ This is an apt phrase which, in a post-Chalcedonian retrospect, could be applied more fully to Christ in his unique identity as the *composite hypostasis* of Creator and creature. For many of the patristic theologians whom I have cited in this chapter, some from before Chalcedon, some after Chalcedon, and some even who dissented from its christological definition, the freedom of the Creator came together with the pure freedom of the creature in the fiat of Jesus as *cosmic Christ*. In his authority as Son and Logos, they believed, Christ enjoyed creative freedom before the foundation of the world and at the inception of creation; but that freedom also decisively materialized in the progressive actions of his incarnation. The goal, then, was to understand the coordination or integration of these different dimensions of his freedom in any individual deed.

In the case of the virgin birth, patristic interpreters envisioned Christ as the Creator of his own flesh as well as that of his virgin mother, working alongside the Holy Spirit in making possible the assumption of a body. By that birth he opened the door to remaking human nature itself, restoring the dignity of Adam while inaugurating the eschatological humanity of the New Adam. In his baptism, the rationale for which significantly exercised many Christian commentators, Christ tied together his primordial work in creation with his present inauguration of a new creation. Whether the Holy Spirit had already anointed all water for creative and redemptive purposes (Tertullian), or the Spirit had specially consecrated the waters of the Jordan (Pseudo-Didymus), or Christ himself had sanctified the waters of baptism for all time by entering the Jordan with his holy incarnate body (a view widely held in Syriac and Armenian tradition), the strong conviction was that Christ (with the Spirit) was once more using the primal element of water to reorder the cosmos. Jordan flowed from the waters of Paradise and back again for the sake of cosmic restoration. Some commentators, as we saw, additionally paralleled Christ's baptismal *descensus* with his descent into Sheol or hell, vanquishing the invisible forces of darkness still haunting creation in its watery depths. All told, the baptism of Jesus was an event of cosmic proportions that framed the Christian's baptism as participation in the new creation.

Patristic interpretation of the miracles of Jesus in his earthly ministry likewise set in bold relief the ways that his signs and wonders gestured both

²⁸⁷ *Th  ologie de l'agonie du Christ: La libert   humaine du Fils de Dieu et son importance sot  riologique mises en lumi  re par saint Maxime le Confesseur* (Paris: Beauchesnes, 1979), 86–99. L  thel uses the phrase in conjunction with Maximus' exposition in *Opusc. theol. et pol.* 6 (PG 91:65A–68D) of Jesus voluntarily handing over his human will to the will of the Father in the agony of Gethsemane.

his authority over creation and his freedom to create anew. The former was demonstrated especially in feats such as calming the storm at sea and walking on water, where Maximus in particular discerned Jesus' immediate ability to alter the very mode (*τρόπος*) in which created natures behave. The latter was manifest in miracles like the transformation of water into wine and the various healings. I quote again Hilary's telling comment on the miracle at Cana: "It was not a mixing; it was a creation, and a creation which was not a beginning, but a transformation. A weaker liquid was not obtained by admixture of a stronger element; an existing thing perished and a new thing came into being."²⁸⁸ Christ was able at will to produce something unprecedented using existing matter as his raw material, displaying unmistakable parallels to the mysteries of his incarnation and resurrection. Indeed, those connections were also dramatized in commentary on the healing miracles, such as the story of the blind man (John 9) where Irenaeus and others imagined Jesus' spittle added to the clay of the earth as a sure sign of the power of incarnational grace to remake Adam's posterity.

Given the consistency of Jesus' incarnate ministry with the Creator's purposes for the world, the seeming inconsistency or disruption posed by his passion predictably came under intense scrutiny. Christian thinkers very early on began to portray the utter scandal of the cross as a paradoxical signal of its decisive role within the forward advance of the *oikonomia*. Interpreters from Irenaeus to Maximus intuited that the "original" plan of creation did not just accommodate the death of Jesus but made it pivotal to its accomplishment. The triune Creator premeditated the utility of death not only for fulfilling his punitive purposes against sin but for revealing the depth of his sacrificial love for creation, as the divine freedom to create was constrained solely by the Creator's boundless love. The patristic tradition East and West ultimately did not move very far from Irenaeus' fundamental insight that the relation between Creator and creation had to go through a refiner's fire, had to be tested and matured through creation's historical experience, as in an unfolding drama in which the outcomes are immanent in the plot but not immediately apparent while the action is still going on. A fertile typological imagination allowed early Christian interpreters to contemplate the divine economy in all of its complexity and thickness while still discerning a singular, seamless strategy of the Creator that insinuated creativity and salvation. They judged the weight of Jesus' death to be such that the passion was properly basic to that strategy rather than an epiphenomenon. The ineffable Wisdom of the Creator demanded as much, and the "voluntary passivity" of Christ in his passion exhibited all the more powerfully, if paradoxically, his creative fiat.

²⁸⁸ *De Trinitate* 3.5 (SC 443:342), trans. NPNF² 9:63.

Inevitably, some patristic interpreters still explored precisely how the suffering and death of Christ embodied God's creative as well as redemptive objectives. Some authors, deeply resonating with the Bible's own outlook on creation out of chaos, focused on Christ's death and descent into hell as the ultimate victory of the Creator over the resurgent forces of nothingness, evil, and darkness, and ultimately over death itself, frequently personified as the seemingly insurmountable enemy. Here a certain functional dualism was unavoidable. The same Creator who had instituted death had to destroy it, but not before its providential purpose had played out to full term. Other authors followed out the positive agencies of death in the *oikonomia*, including its impetus for the hope of resurrection or the rehabilitative role of mortality itself in the moral and spiritual life. Significant differences arose between those, like Tertullian or Augustine, who accentuated the finality of death's punitive function, and those Eastern theologians like Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, Maximus, and certainly Isaac of Nineveh, who—sometimes tentatively or qualifiedly—imagined Christ so thoroughly vanquishing death's grip on creation that nothing could result but the ultimate restoration and transformation of all created beings.

Although the efficacy of Christ's death for the renewal of creation enjoyed early and extensive treatment in patristic thought, reflection on the precise ramifications of his resurrection was slower in developing. In the second and third centuries, the focus was more on how Jesus' resurrection demonstrated the promise of the eschatological resurrection of the dead; and yet the renunciation of Marcion's teaching on a pneumatic resurrection stimulated deeper consideration of the bodily nature of Christ's resurrection. In the fourth and fifth centuries, after the major battles with Gnostic and Marcionite traditions had passed, theologically seasoned exegesis of the gospel resurrection narratives provided the platform for commentators to probe deeper into the nature of Christ's resurrected body and its ontological relation to the resurrected bodies of the faithful. Among the commentators who rose to the occasion were Gregory of Nyssa, with his assertion that Christ's resurrected body perfectly solidified the fusion of body and soul in the renewal of human nature, Theodore of Mopsuestia, who articulated how his resurrection ultimately bonded the whole of spiritual and material creation, and Augustine, who projected the risen body of Christ in enduring solidarity with his universal ecclesial body (the *totus Christus*).

Christ's ascension, which proved to be a vital link between cosmology and Christology in patristic interpretation, became in some sense a recapitulation of recapitulation. What the ascended Christ presented before the throne of the Father was not only his glorified flesh itself but also the fruit of his whole incarnational descent in working to realize a new creation. Commensurate with the increasingly rich liturgical celebration of the ascension, Christian commentators sought to demonstrate how, not only humanity, but the whole

of creation, participated in this event and appropriated its benefits. Whether, as certain Syriac exegetes surmised, created beings in some sense ascended with Christ, or, as Maximus the Confessor envisioned, both the natural and the accidental divisions within the structure of creation were reconciled and healed through his bridging of Creator and creation, the ascension was in its own right a decisive act of new creation on the part of the Creator Christ.

The benefits of Christ's work of cosmic recapitulation, from his birth to his ascension, were nonetheless unimaginable to Christian exponents apart from the combined agencies of the Holy Spirit. Within the "thick" drama of the divine economy, the whole Trinity was strategically operative in any and all manifestations of the common divine power (*δύναμις*) and activity (*ἐνέργεια*). Identifying the distinctive action of the Holy Spirit in the *oikonomia* went hand in hand with discerning the Spirit's status within the Trinity, and more specifically the Spirit's dignity as "Creator" in his own right. Especially in the wake of the Pneumatomachian controversy, pro-Nicene theologians put substantial effort into proving that the Spirit was not himself a creature and that there was no scriptural warrant for saying so. On the contrary, the Holy Spirit, who "blows wherever he wills" (John 3:8), also exercises the creative divine fiat through his eternal, irreducible relation to the Father and the Son, in a mission to bring out the full benefits of the triune Creator's grace in and for creation: animating, sanctifying, beautifying, perfecting.

Expounding the Holy Spirit's agency as Animator, or "Giver of life" in the formal language of the Nicene Creed, immediately recalled the "hovering" Spirit's primordial work in creating and redeeming the world (again and again) from formlessness or chaos (Gen. 1:2). Those patristic commentators who appropriated Eusebius of Emesa's classic image of the Spirit as a mother hen brooding over and nurturing her young sought to capture the intimacy as well as the sheer power of the Spirit's life-giving role. There was no overlooking the simplicity but profundity of the Creator's tender love and mercy toward the fledgling creation. The same Spirit who, like an animating wind, commanded the waters of creation, was still altogether alive and well in the church and hovering over the waters of baptism, bringing to bear all his creative power on this *recreative* sacrament.

Sanctification, meanwhile, was for many patristic authors the signature work of the Holy Spirit, insofar as it embodied the Spirit's power to grant both physical vitality and a share in divine life, the whole panoply of participable divine virtues. Here we see how deeply creation and salvation overlapped in the early Christian imagination, as sanctification was not only about purification from sin but about the fulfillment of creatures' original vocation, namely, deification or ultimate Godlikeness. But here too we find, long term, the emergence of contrasting, even disparate, perspectives East and West on the precise interrelation between Creator and creature in the actualization of sanctification. Despite controversy over the nature of sanctification and

deification that endured well beyond the early Christian era, there nonetheless remained a shared underlying conviction that the Spirit alone enjoys *by nature* the divine virtues comprised in his holiness, and is the prevenient source of the sanctity of creatures who are not by nature holy, and who, from their very inception, require the Spirit's attending and sustaining grace.

Both sanctification and the beautification of creatures were seen as ongoing, formative ministries of the Holy Spirit by the theologians whom we have considered. I am convinced, with von Balthasar, Patrick Sherry, and others, that a rich theological aesthetics was in play among many of these patristic thinkers. Beauty bespoke not just the eschatological perfection of the pure form of created beings who had once been formless (*ex nihilo*), but the teleological progression, under the aegis the Spirit, of their conformation with the image of Jesus Christ: the beauty of "becoming." Gregory of Nyssa, in particular, emphasized how seeing is becoming, and for creatures to take on that beautiful form it had to be revealed to and in them by the Spirit. In the distinctive perspectives of Augustine and Dionysius the Areopagite, that revelation of beauty is a gracious illumination simultaneously from without and within. As Maarten Wisse aptly writes of Augustine, for the creature "the beautiful does not qualify the true [as in modern aesthetics], but rather embeds the knowledge of the true in the volutative [sic; read 'voluntative'] and emotional nature of the human being. To know the truth does not leave me cold or lets [sic] me rationally decide whether I like that truth or not. Rather, the encounter of the truth makes me embrace it, attach myself to it, become in relation to it."²⁸⁹ In other words, the truth is always *formative*.

The Spirit's perfecting work, as I understand it in mature patristic pneumatology, most basically consisted in the Spirit's sublime role, together with the Son, of finally consummating the connection between the mysteries of *theologia* and *oikonomia*. While there is no imperfection within the Trinity, the Son and the Spirit had to bring to perfection or completion the triune Creator's purposes in the economy—where he is "working still" (John 5:17). The Spirit's perfecting mission, at once primordial and eschatological, was but the sum of his other agencies of animating, sanctifying, and beautifying. The Spirit, moreover, sealed the cooperation of the three Persons as the triune Creator generously held out to created beings a derivative share in his own perfection-in-relation.

²⁸⁹ Wisse, "Augustine's Trinitarian Aesthetics in *De Trinitate*," 410.

Drama of the Divine Economy

*Creator and Creation in Early
Christian Theology and Piety*

PAUL M. BLOWERS

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

OXFORD

UNIVERSITY PRESS

Great Clarendon Street, Oxford, OX2 6DP,
United Kingdom

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.
It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship,
and education by publishing worldwide. Oxford is a registered trade mark of
Oxford University Press in the UK and in certain other countries

© Paul M. Blowers 2012

The moral rights of the author have been asserted

First Edition published in 2012

Impression: 1

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in
a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the
prior permission in writing of Oxford University Press, or as expressly permitted
by law, by licence or under terms agreed with the appropriate reprographics
rights organization. Enquiries concerning reproduction outside the scope of the
above should be sent to the Rights Department, Oxford University Press, at the
address above

You must not circulate this work in any other form
and you must impose this same condition on any acquirer

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
Data available

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
Data available

ISBN 978-0-19-966041-4

Printed in Great Britain by
MPG Books Group, Bodmin and King's Lynn